Table of Contents

1. disclaimer
2. allegiances
3. prologue
4. chapter one
5. chapter two
6. chapter three
7. chapter four
8. chapter five
9. chapter six
10. chapter seven
11. chapter eight
12. chapter nine
13. chapter ten
14. chapter eleven
15. chapter twelve
16. chapter thirteen
17. chapter fourteen
18. chapter fifteen
19. chapter sixteen
20. chapter seventeen
21. chapter eighteen
22. chapter nineteen
23. chapter twenty
24. chapter twenty one
25. chapter twenty two
26. chapter twenty three
27. chapter twenty four
28. chapter twenty five
29. chapter twenty six
30. chapter twenty seven
31. chapter twenty eight
32. chapter twenty nine
33. chapter thirty
34. chapter thirty one

35. chapter thirty two
36. chapter thirty three
37. chapter thirty four
38. chapter thirty five
39. chapter thirty six
40. chapter thirty seven
41. chapter thirty eight
42. chapter thirty nine
43. chapter forty
44. chapter forty one
45. chapter forty two
46. chapter forty three
47. chapter forty four
48. chapter forty five
49. chapter forty six
50. chapter forty seven
51. chapter forty eight
52. chapter forty nine
53. chapter fifty
54. epilogue
55. note and trivia

disclaimer

Greetings and welcome to my book! let's get onto the disclaimer so you can begin reading.

This book will contain LGBTQ+ topics. if you are uncomfortable with this or you are homophobic/transphobic/biphobic etc., get off this account and this book right now. absolutely none of this behavior is tolerated or appreciated. this is a safe place for all of my readers and I will not tolerate anything that makes it unsafe for anyone.

Now, although this book is not marked with a mature rating, it will contain cat-death and possibly disturbing descriptions of such. it will not contain anything sexual but will have descriptions of death and injury that could be upsetting and disturbing to some readers, so be cautioned.

That's all. please enjoy!

allegiances

SAGECLAN

— leader —
Cougarstar | *strong, large-bodied tom with thick tawny fur and sharp green eyes*

— heir —
Bearpatch | *clunky-bodied tom with short, thin, dark brown fur, darker paws, and pale green eyes* | mentor to Finchpaw

— deputy —
Palewhisker | *grayish-tawny furred tom with a lighter muzzle, white flecks on his face, and pale brown eyes*

— healer —
Coalbelly | *she-cat with thick, charcoal fur with darker stripes, lighter paws, ears, and brown eyes*

— healer's apprentice —
Twilightcloud | *shiny, black-furred she-cat with white dots on her paws, tail, muzzle, and back, and light yellow eyes*

— warriors —
Pantherleap | *large, lean tom with thick tawny fur and dark green eyes*
Fernfall | *thin, small tom with white and black fur* | mentor to Bumblepaw

Freckletuft | *muscled she-cat with white fur and orange-black-brown freckles all over* | mentor to Birchpaw
Adderheart | *thin, lean, creamy-pale-brown-furred tom with two white stripes on his tail and dark gray eyes*
Marigoldcry | *thick, white-furred she-cat with creamy stripes and bright, yellowy-amber eyes*
Fluffyflame | *fluffy, white-furred tom with bright amber eyes* | mentor to Swallowpaw
Antwhisper | *small, lean, reddish-brown-furred tom with a gray gaze*
Shrewclaw | *pale brown-furred tom with blue eyes*
Dustshade | *fluffy, white-furred tom with dark russet paws, muzzle, belly, and a sharp amber gaze*
Streamfang | *a she-cat with thick white fur that has cream stripes on her legs and a dark russet belly, paws, and chest*
Russetpelt | *tom with a shiny russet pelt and green eyes*
Birdwish | *brown she-cat with a white belly, muzzle, ears, and golden-amber eyes*
Poppywish | *white-furred she-cat with brown paws and bright amber eyes*
Brindlebreeze | *white, black, and brown patched she-cat with sharp yellow eyes*
Galewind | *creamy-brown tom with darker tail and an amber gaze*
Runningfoot | *brown she-cat with white paws and tabby stripes*
Beetlepath | *a brown-furred tom with a darker belly and sharp green eyes*
Mudstripe | *a tom with soft, muddied brown tabby fur and pale green eyes*
Briargaze | *light brown she-cat with darker spots, a white patch around her left eye, and dark blue eyes*

— apprentices —
Bumblepaw | *black-and-white tom with light brown eyes*
Swallowpaw | *black-and-white tabby she-cat with golden-brown eyes*
Birchpaw | *white-and-brown patched tom with a pale yellow gaze*
Finchpaw | *white she-cat with ginger ears and tabby stripes on her tail and green eyes*

— queens —
Tinydust | *very small she-cat with thin whitish-brown fur and pale gold eyes* | leader's mate

Sootdawn | *lean-bodied she-cat with long, dark brown fur, white paws, and bright yellowy-amber eyes* | heir's mate
Willowdapple | *smooth white-furred she-cat with dark brown-ginger dapples and sharp brown eyes*

— elders —
Milkfrost | *small, milky-furred she-cat with a grayed muzzle and warm amber eyes*
Vixenfeather | *lean light brown she-cat with darker speckles and a sharp brown gaze*

prologue

"Doepool, I said to get them *out*!"

Fury shone brightly in a pair of dark green eyes. The she-cat, whose soft, shiny pelt was puffed up, rose to her paws and edged in front of three small bundles of fur. Gloom concealed the den and the area around it was dark, though the rage that burned within her eyes was enough to light it up.

It was just a tad past dusk, where the sky was darkened but not completely black yet, and where the sky was speckled lightly with stars, but not completely swarmed with them yet.

Which was mostly the choice of the burly tom, since then his ancestors couldn't see him. Not necessarily that he cared — instead it was just for show.

Yet the she-cat was not complying as he had hoped. Though, he should've expected it.

"No! These are my kits and nobody will take them away from me... not again."

An equally angry pair of sharp green eyes narrowed. The rather hefty and large tom unsheathed his claws and a hiss escaped his jaws: "Don't test me."

"Two other litters. Don't you feel a morsel of regret? For their futures? Their lives, so painfully taken away from them?" Venom dripped from the she-cat's tone as she stared at the tom across from him.

He flicked a paw, irritation clear in his movements, "Who cares? You know they weren't truly fit to be—"

"Shut your StarClan forsaken jaws, you know you would've groomed them to be whatever you wanted to be so that excuse is *invalid*.

Now let me live with this litter in peace, okay? I don't care if I have to slave every day for the rest of my life but just let me... be happy with them, okay? You've taken so much from me and you don't deserve what you have—!"

Her voice ended in a terrified squeak as he struck his claws down her face with a swift stroke.

Pain blossomed within her and she stumbled a bit, paws and body collapsing slightly beneath her. Hurriedly, she pulled herself to her paws, although rather shakily, giving her fur a light shake and lifting a paw to touch her face. Blood was seeping from a clean slash on her head. Terror seemed to grip her, taking a strong hold of the she-cat.

"Now get out!" The tom slammed a paw on the ground and his sharp green gaze seemed to grow all the more infuriated.

Staggering to try and gain more control, she quickly edged to the side of the den, eyes widening all the more.

"Don't— hurt me— anymore!" The she-cat managed through the blood that was now slowly inching down her white-speckled face.

He approached her for a moment, paw raising once more, although he swiftly turned to the three kits that were mewling pitifully at the two fighting cats. The burly tom stared down at them with a glint in his sharp green gaze.

The she-cat swiftly edged in the way of the kits. "Don't hurt— them either. Please!"

The larger tom used his body to shove her away and she tumbled swiftly to the ground with a light *thump*. With the soft-furred she-cat out of the way, he raised a paw and brought it down systematically on each of the kits.

"*No*!" she cried out, trying to get to him, but each time he'd shove her away and kick her to the ground without mercy, lips drawing back into a snarl until each of the kits were still. Blood pooled around them, soaking the little pelts that barely covered them.

"Y—you killed them! Ag—again...!"

He turned to her, eyes a blaze of furious leafy-shades. "Now get *out*, I said! Or would you like to suffer the same fate as these three, and the other litters?"

"How dare— you?!" she cried, voice hitching. "You weren't supposed— to be the one... You were the m-mistake!"

He snarled incoherently, clearly trying to block out her voice. She growled, a broken noise from a broken she-cat.

"You— you won't do this anymore, and— and I'll be s—sure of it," the she-cat hissed, shaking her head and splattering blood over him. The hefty tom hissed and snarled once more, glaring heavily at her.

After a little pause, a scoff rose from the tom's muzzle, "Are you planning to harm *me*? Surely you're joking, you know that I can call over—"

Her eyes widened and she stumbled slightly on her paws, almost as if she had attempted to inch backward and away from him in the rather small den.

"Get these bodies out right now, and take yourself with them!" He stomped a paw, claws slowly edging out of their sheaths once more.

She cried out once more, though this time with more fear and panic as she edged to her deceased kits, and he leaped onto her, fury spreading through the large cat like a raging fire. His claws dug into her shoulders as he stared down at her bloody face, a clean cut over her head.

Tail like a waving flag behind him, he snarled with a voice filled with venom, "Would you like to challenge me again?"

The shiny-furred she-cat managed to pull herself out from underneath his burly form and, with a swift movement, she let out a long, low growl.

"You are terrible. I hope that SageClan falls from your mistakes."

Then, she grabbed her three kits with a choked sob and sprinted from the den.

He hissed irritably yet quietly, staring down at the bloodstains in his nest and around the den with clear disdain. He'd have to get these cleaned fast and without much suspicion. That would be fairly simple. Most cats wouldn't be up for just randomly searching his den, regardless. He could always be extra sharp today...

Nobody would question him. Nobody *should* question him. And this was a prime example, yet it was one that nobody could know of.

Moonlight slowly seeped into the den, illuminating the area. The hefty tom turned and quickly slipped from the den, edging into the shadows to avoid being spotted by other cats.

If nobody learned what had happened, everything would be fine.

chapter one

Chirp, chirp, chirp!

"StarClan forsaken birds," grumbled a cat in a clearly irritated tone.

Maybe if you didn't complain about it, we'd all still be asleep anyways.

Thanks to the mutter of an irritated warrior, the warrior's den was slowly getting up. A few cats could almost always easily get out of their nests with swift movements, though most felt the need to laze around longer. Or simply, they felt too tired to move.

And that usually meant being shouted at by Cougarstar — SageClan's fierce-tongued leader — which meant a lot of the newer warriors got little to no sleep at night.

Adderheart was certainly not a younger warrior. He was actually a senior one, and although they held no more power than a usual warrior, it was generally known that the younger warriors and younger cats, in general, were to respect the senior warriors and hold their opinions to more of a higher quality — a higher value. Of course, there was always one cat who was snappy or sharp with Adderheart or the other senior warriors, and he knew they never really meant it.

It simply was just that the younger warriors wished to have their opinions so highly valued, too. But of course, they would reach that stage eventually, provided they actually survived a tad past their middle warriorhood. That was normal, though. It was frequent that cats lived past their middle moons, although some didn't live much past that.

It was the reason why there were so few elders. Most of the elderly warriors wanted to serve their Clan for as long as they could, so they didn't have to sit around all day in a den, yet many saw a few lovely pros to being an elder that others simply didn't see.

The healing in SageClan was decent as it was. The herbs were fairly advanced compared to the previous healers. It seemed with each passing generation, more discoveries were made about herbs and healing that contributed to SageClan's prosperity.

Well, only some cats believed that the Clan was living in that way.

Adderheart was one of the cats who frequently got up earlier. It was generally much better to do so, anyway. Being shouted at by Cougarstar was not only embarrassing but very hard on the ears, especially when it happened nearly every day. He didn't understand how others did it.

And with a quick movement, the lean tom slipped from the warrior's den and out into the camp.

Scents of marsh drifted to him, tinged with the smell of frog and mouse. Head whipping to the fresh-kill pile, he saw both of the previously mentioned pieces of prey, gently laying atop the mostly empty pile. His tail flickered absently.

Pale creamy-brownish fur rising for a moment, he glanced up at the sky.

A late greenleaf sun climbed carefully into the paleish blue expanse above his head. It was surprising to him how fast the warm season had ended. Adderheart really adored the warmth and the pleasant sun of greenleaf and newleaf, and now it was going away. Soon it would be leaf-fall, where the days would be chilly and the wind would nip at him. And then soon would come the biting chill of leaf-bare...

Shivering at the thought, he cast his dark gray eyes around once more.

Past the thorn and bramble barrier that surrounded the dip of the camp was a few trees. That was the majority of their territory. Pine trees that had ample space between them which was filled with simple marshland. Of course, rocks and ponds dotted the territory too. Yet it was nice to the older tom, honestly. He loved the light squish of the ground between his paws and the small pricklings of

the pine needles as he walked.

His tail, with the two white stripes that was practically attributed to his very name, flicked slightly as he spotted Bearpatch and Palewhisker both emerging from their den.

The camp was set up strategically. After the past leader had died — his name was Pheasantstar, and many liked his ruling much better than the current leader — Cougarstar had set up some new dens.

Particularly, the den that the heir and the deputy shared. Many cats had been upset about that addition. It set them apart from the other cats, and it made them more prominently better. Cougarstar, of course, hadn't cared at all. He wasn't just going to tear down the den.

Bearpatch hadn't spoken up about the changes that had been made, and most of the Clan was under the impression that Palewhisker actually enjoyed and appreciated the change. Adderheart wasn't necessarily sure himself, although he mostly believed that Palewhisker enjoyed the addition of the den.

"Greetings, Adderheart."

The pale-furred warrior dipped his head respectfully to Bearpatch, who had approached him rather swiftly, "Good morning."

"Would you mind leading a patrol?" Although the deputy usually set up patrols, it was normal that Bearpatch would try and help out, as he really didn't do a lot during the day. At least, that was what most of the Clan assumed.

The warrior nodded, "Would you like me to take it somewhere specifically?"

Bearpatch shrugged, turning away and flicking his dark brown tail in dismissal.

"Wherever is fine," he called over his shoulder, voice light.

The news was pleasing to Adderheart. It was nice to have some sort of control over where he'd be going. Trotting to the warrior's den,

he peeked his head in. A few cats were still lazing around, heads laid on their mossy nests. They'd be scolded shortly by Cougarstar.

Turning away from the den, the older tom's tail flicked as he surveyed the camp once more.

Poppyfur and Birdwish, two siblings in a litter of four, were standing somewhat near the entrance, and Streamfang was idling nearby. Antwhisper was settled near the entrance too, but he was sat down and quickly swallowing a small creature.

Milkfrost and Vixenfeather, SageClan's two elders, were lounging in a patch of sun. Their fur seemed to brush all the closer and the latter of the two mentioned inched a bit towards each other.

Adderheart was mildly surprised at the clearness of the two's intentions. The elders were respected among the Clan yet these two seemed to want to completely destroy their rank within SageClan. They had acted similarly in the past, but supposedly in secret, according to the rumors.

Cougarstar did not like that behavior.

Unfortunately for the elders, the thick-furred, large tawny tom emerged from his den at that very moment. It was usual he checked the warrior's den first for any lazy warriors, although far too quickly his sharp green eyes swept the camp and landed on the elders.

Watching as the tom marched over, Adderheart swiftly shuffled out of the way. His tail curved and flicked sharply, dark gray gaze sweeping to Antwhisper.

"Antwhisper— gather Streamfang, Poppyfur, and Birdwish to go to the borde—"

The pale-furred warrior was interrupted by a shout from Cougarstar:

"I said, split up now!"

His voice was furious as he stared down the two elders, who

seemed to shiver in their very skin. Though, they both seemed to hold a flare of brightness within their eyes.

A deadly silence settled upon the clearing, firstly taking hold of the elders, and then of the cats who had been milling around. Their gazes steeled over, staring at the two she-cats. No longer would their voices echo among the lilting tones of casual chatter.

Once more the quiet was broken by the sharp, furious tone of the tawny leader.

"*Now*, I said!"

Eyes brimming with unsaid words, the two she-cats hurriedly pulled themselves to their paws, backing up a bit, and consequently, they both knocked into the brambles of the wall of camp.

It caught on Vixenfeather's back paw.

The elderly she-cat swallowed a cry and Milkfrost's warm amber gaze sharpened at the other she-cat's pain. Though they still were rather close together, and behind them, their tails were twined tightly, as if supplying quiet comfort to each other.

"No."

It was Vixenfeather who spoke in a quiet, defiant, though not afraid, tone of voice, staring up at the tom, her light brown fur puffed up. Beside her, Milkfrost's own milky-white fur seemed to bristle a little bit.

The burly leader lifted a hefty paw, and soon his claws flashed out of their sheaths, shimmering in the late greenleaf light. They were long and edged, glaring at the two.

"SageClan does not permit this behavior," his voice was sharp, low, dangerous.

Vixenfeather rose to her paws, shivering slightly, and she too lifted a paw, though she did not unsheathe her claws.

Adderheart stood, watching. He felt the need to intervene, but he

just couldn't. It would ruin too many things. And yes, perhaps that was selfish, but if Cougarstar laid a claw on them, hopefully, someone would say something or do something. If not, he thought he might. So simply, he stood there, tail sharply angled and fur rising by the moment.

Milkfrost copied the other she-cat's movement.

"You both will be harmed if you do not get out right now."

"Your views are skewed, Cougarstar," said Milkfrost, tone lilting yet soft, although it held no traces of mocking. "Is it your place to get in the way of lov—"

"And yours are not? Now get out of my camp," the tom hissed, bringing his paw up a little more and letting his claws glint in the sunlight. "This is not love. This is horrible and brings disgrace to us, and you of all cats should know that. This has been disallowed for moons. What makes you think it's simply allowed now?"

Vixenfeather spoke once more, "Us? You speak as though we have similar views. Think, Cougarstar. You are bound to fall if you banish us. We hold the stories of the past and we even hold your li —"

Cougarstar struck Vixenfeather across the face without another word, though his gaze was still a raging mess of dark green shades — it almost said more than if he were to have shouted at her.

Milkfrost howled almost as loudly as Vixenfeather did, voice cracking slightly at the pain that immediately spread upon the latter's features. Adderheart watched as Vixenfeather stumbled over her paws and tripped, attempting to escape the camp to get away from the muscled tom, as Cougarstar had approached once more. Milkfrost let out a cry, though it was not afraid or scared, simply defiant.

And then with that, she whipped around and hurriedly dashed after the cat that was supposedly her new mate.

Everyone in the camp had practically gone stone-still, bodies

freezing in place as they watched the whole thing unfold in front of them, and yet after it had occurred most didn't move. Their gazes, so steely before, now held traces of emotion, though none of these emotions were noticeable enough.

Or even really, detectable. Most had some sort of mask hiding what they really felt in their bright gazes, and as Adderheart glanced around, most prominently it was some sort of anger mixed with confusion. Despite that, everyone seemed to be holding their breath, backs slightly arched, waiting for something else to happen or someone to say or do something, anything—

Cougarstar whipped around, large tail lashing. His green eyes shone with fury as his mate, Tinydust, practically tumbled out of the den beneath the highrock and rather clumsily rushed to his side. Instantly, she nuzzled him and tried to wrap her smaller form around his large, broad-shouldered one. It didn't work.

His thick tawny pelt, so fluffed up before, had now flattened and was smoothed against his muscled body, and quiet words drifted from the two as they chattered. Tinydust lead him away and back toward his den, and their son, Bearpatch, after hearing the commotion, raced after them.

"I thought you all knew better," snarled Cougarstar to no one in particular as he glanced over his shoulder, gaze a fiery flame of green — a single blaze of rage.

It wasn't that the leader was unstable or was unfit to lead... just that his rather mild mate and son preferred it if he wasn't always so abrasive.

Adderheart mutely watched as Poppyfur, Birdwish, Streamfang, and Antwhisper gathered silently at the entrance of the camp. Blinking at them, the older warrior walked over and with a flickering of his tail, they left the camp.

As they began to walk mindlessly in one direction, Poppyfur questioned quietly, "What if we find them—"

Is she really asking that? The blood in the air will be a clear telling

factor if we're actually near them or not. The pale, creamy-brown furred tom thought, almost irritated with her. As usual, the older warrior was jumping to conclusions. Despite being fiercely loyal and having well-constructed opinions, Adderheart tended to make unreasonable assumptions about others.

He also was rather quiet and didn't express his feelings very well, but that was for another day.

"We won't," Antwhisper assured the she-cat rather warmly.

Crushing, I see. Not really the greatest idea.

Despite the fact that it was clear Antwhisper liked a certain white-furred she-cat, it was unlikely that too many pairings between cats were made within the Clan, even if they loved each other. All SageClan she-cats were not permitted to choose their mates without Cougarstar and Tinydust's approval. Tinydust and Bearpatch's mate, Sootdawn, were permanent queens, despite the former being disallowed to have kits again.

The sun still glimmered brightly overhead, slowly moving across the sky as the group of cats continued to walk along. Adderheart appreciated the light squish of the ground beneath his paws and the bounciness of the needles.

They had occasionally passed a small puddle or too and Poppyfur had slipped behind the group to study it as if she expected there to be a frog or some sort of piece of prey leaping out shortly from it. But of course, nothing happened, and the she-cat lapsed into a strange gallop to catch up with the rest of them.

"My paws hurt," complained Poppyfur, tail lashing behind her with mild irritation.

Perhaps that weird gallop and the pausing is making it worse.

The needles from the pine trees didn't really hurt Adderheart's hardened paw pads. Although, he wondered how his other Clanmates' paws hadn't grown used to it by now. Most of the warriors had been around for a while, and even the newer ones

seemed to be fine. Glancing to the left and spotting a familiar pine tree, he realized that they were nearer than he'd supposed.

And well, they hadn't encountered the elders.

"Here we are," mewed Antwhisper, ears twitching and whiskers flickering as if he was attempting to pick up a scent.

Streamfang's thick white pelt seemed to rise for a moment as the group approached the border and Birdwish's white ears pricked.

"Smell that?" Streamfang asked, walking up to the border, her tail flickering behind her.

Adderheart's head tipped a little to the left as he inhaled. There wasn't too much out of the ordinary, besides—

"Blood, across the border and over our's a little."

Birdwish interrupted with a sharp lash of her tail. The she-cat's golden-amber eyes seemed to become more edged by the moment, narrowing as well as she sniffed closer to the border.

Poppyfur seemed unconcerned.

"Think it's Vixenfeather?"

"Do you think they'd travel all the way out here so quickly, and that we'd have smelled no blood?" Adderheart questioned, forcing a note of curiosity into his tone.

She shrugged.

Antwhisper and Adderheart approached the border more closely at extremely similar intervals, sniffing the air once more. A metallic scent filled the latter's senses and he cringed, flinching back. He would never get used to it.

"I don't think that's prey," Birdwish murmured, golden-amber eyes narrowing.

A pause filled the air, settling thickly over the conversation that was

fading away. Adderheart's mind continued to whip with unsaid words, though mostly it was filled with confusion and concern. Ideas prickled through his pale fur.

"Let's go back," the warrior practically ordered, turning away, "Antwhisper, you'll report this back to... to Bearpatch with every detail."

The mentioned tom's head tipped a bit to the left, confusion swarming immediately within his gray eyes, "Why the heir? Cougarstar should know—"

Adderheart knew that there was one main issue with telling the leader and it focused primarily around himself. Rather selfish of him to ask for that, but it was important Bearpatch knew, not the leader.

Streamfang's dark amber eyes glimmered with understanding, a small nod forming as she murmured, "Cougarstar will blame it on Adderheart, especially with.. recent events."

"But isn't it his fault for not avoiding this part?" Poppyfur dimly chimed in.

A sigh escaped Birdwish, "Poppyfur, the blood isn't Adderheart's fault. Besides, we're supposed to check the whole border... and we barely did that. We really shouldn't... speak of this."

The group shared a moment before quickly springing into action to get back to camp as quick as they could. Whipping around, they all practically wove around several trees, whipping to be sure they weren't slapped by a few stray branches with the sharp needles, avoiding rocks and leaping neatly over dips in the ground.

Though as they approached, Streamfang, who had been at the front of the group, slowed down noticeably, breathing hard. Flanks heaving with effort, Poppyfur managed to stumble along, eyes flashing as she practically tumbled over her own paws.

Antwhisper's lean form wasn't having as much trouble as the others, yet still, he paused for a moment a tad before the entrance to catch

his breath, tail lashing as if attempting to assist in catching his breath.

The pale-furred warrior was in a similar situation, though he was experienced with attempting to breathe smoothly. They slowed together, pausing a few tree-lengths before the entrance once more, as they had been slowly inching, inching forward...

Though if they moved far too close they'd be caught.

So instead, they stood there, all catching their breath for a moment, Adderheart the first to be able to get it under control. Birdwish soon after, and then the others. They shared a small moment once more, nodding silently.

And despite the fact that Adderheart would be fine, a somewhat nervous stirring still was present in his belly.

chapter two

After a few more moments passed between them all, the group slipped quietly back into camp, and Antwhisper quickly turned and swerved away.

Adderheart watched him head toward Bearpatch, who was resting in a patch of sun, brown pelt dappled with light, with a piece of prey laid at his paws. Beside him, Finchpaw, his apprentice, skirted off toward the apprentice's den. Poppyfur practically danced toward the fresh-kill pile, Birdwish hurriedly trotting after her, and Streamfang glanced around before settling down in a different patch of sunlight.

The memory of Vixenfeather and Milkfrost snapped into the older warrior's mind and he swiftly turned away, his pale tail lashing as he found a decent place to sit in the camp. It was near the entrance, so he had a nice view of the camp.

Sunlight streamed down upon his fur as he settled down. Despite that they had been out for a while, it was still day, yet now the sun was slowly inching closer to the horizon as if it was threatening to slip beneath it and cover the world in darkness any moment, and still, a little chill entered the camp, weaving past the thorny entrance. Adderheart flicked his tail with the two white stripes over his paws and he gazed around.

Most cats weren't really around. Presumably, Palewhisker had sent them all out on patrol.

He caught a whiff of Birchpaw, Freckletuft, and Dustshade's scent. Freckletuft mentored Birchpaw, so it was usual they went out together. But Dustshade? What was he doing?

Probably just helping, Adderheart thought.

Prey-scent suddenly swarmed his senses and his dark gray eyes flashed over to his left.

Marigoldcry's thick, white fur appeared as she headed through the entrance, followed by Brindlebreeze's white, brown, and black patched pelt. Russetpelt's shiny reddish-brown fur was quick to follow.

Each cat had a piece of prey dangling from their jaws as they headed for the pile, skirting around Poppyfur, whose white fur was puffed up at the chill that entered the camp.

Now that greenleaf was ending, it was usual that there was an icy wind that would sweep by once and a while, and that there was a slightly paler light leaking from the sun. The short-furred cats would never get used to it.

Just then, a cat who looked almost identical to Cougarstar entered the camp. His thick tawny fur and large, strong build was almost a copy of the leader's. Though, this cat had dark green eyes, ones that were soft and gentle compared to the other tom's sharp, edged gaze.

This cat was Pantherleap, a highly respected senior warrior within SageClan. Most cats went to him for advice simply because of his wiseness and intelligence among a wide spread of topics. He was smart and clever, yet still had a soft side when it came to kits — of which he had none. Nobody knew why he didn't have kits — many cats would clamber to be his mate if given half a chance.

Although he *was* still the pale-furred, intelligent, wise cat of the Clan who was not yet an elder, and so most cats looked up to him — mostly the younger warriors and apprentices. Even some of the kits thoroughly enjoyed his company.

Now, he strolled casually past Adderheart with a mouse skewed on his claw and a thrush hanging from his jaws.

The thin warrior shifted slightly, watching as Pantherleap trotted smoothly toward the fresh-kill pile and dropped both prey pieces on the pile. Soon approached a thick-furred she-cat with dark charcoal fur.

And that was Coalbelly, the Clan's healer. A similarly pelted she-cat — though this one had shinier fur and a darker black tone —

quickly trotted behind her mentor.

This cat was Twilightcloud.

Rules for being a healer was strict, so it was lucky that the Clan had two at once. Any and all deputies and healers were disallowed from having kits. Neither of the current she-cats seemed to be too upset with this rule, and if they were, they had decent masks regarding it. Though other rules had been applied too, including a rule that most cats didn't agree with; all healers must be a she-cat.

It was controversial when Cougarstar had first added the rule. Many cats had protested against it simply because it was illogical to completely deny a rank from a certain type of cat. The leader didn't have a specific piece of evidence that mainly supported it and so many called him dumb. Cougarstar, of course, hadn't cared one bit and had just continued on with ruling.

It was so strange that nothing had seemed to be happening to the tom. He appeared to be strong, sharp-minded, intelligent... All the things a cat could want in a leader. Yet he also seemed to be snappy. Moody, even. Irritable, bothered, and even completely unaccepting of others' opinions.

That didn't stop cats from being upset, though. They chattered for days about how unfair it was and how bothersome it was. Then again, Cougarstar claimed it had no effect on the warriors and apprentices since it only affected future generations. And it certainly had — yet still, cats didn't agree with it.

Adderheart shifted his position once more, watching out of the corner of his eye as the three cats ducked into the healer's den. Quiet voices drifted from where they had disappeared, sharp tones soon accompanying it, though the edged tone seemed to be hushed by far calmer voices. His dark gray eyes caught on Fluffyflame and Marigoldcry.

The two were extremely close, more so than other siblings. It was rumored that their mother, a she-cat named Juniperflight, had gotten her kits taken by a sharp-tongued rogue tom. She had gotten them back of course, but then there had been speculation that the

same thing had occurred with her next litter — consequently, that litter was Dustshade and Streamfang.

That lead cats to believe Juniperflight had been... seeing the tom.

Nobody investigated it, and of course, nobody challenged her.

She was far too strong-minded for anyone to actually bring it up.

Besides, Adderheart wouldn't have been up to challenging his mentor.

He didn't mind her training. It was basic, the average training that a mentor would bestow upon an apprentice. Of course, Juniperflight would always put more stress on fighting. She loved fighting, he soon learned. Her claws were long and edged, and she had told him multiple times she loved the feel of the power coursing in her veins as she stood above an opponent.

Adderheart did not like fighting. He found no power in his veins as he stood above a fake opponent in a mock battle; rather within him rose an overwhelming need to do well. He couldn't risk a failure in front of the rest of his Clan.

So he preferred to try and get her to do more hunting training. He was good at hunting. His lean form made it easy to slip around the trees. Even among the shadows, where his pale fur seemed to be the moon among a blanket of darkness, he was able to catch prey that other apprentices had not been able to get. Juniperflight certainly found it interesting.

His mentor had never taught him any sort of climbing training or swimming, besides one time where he'd asked how to climb a tree in case of a flood. That one day she had offered to give him some basic training on swimming to deal with the flood and climbing to avoid it.

It had not been a fun day. Scrapes had littered his lean body since climbing pine trees was not necessarily safe or enjoyable. Swimming had definitely been an adventure too, as the place that Juniperflight had chosen was a pond. It had been far too shallow to

actually learn how to swim in very well.

Besides, she was dead now, and it was mostly her fault.

The creamy-white she-cat had died shortly after Adderheart had been given his full name, and in that short timespan, they had grown farther apart. They hadn't necessarily been close in the first place — simply put, the relation had only been for the training, not really to make the friendship last. Strictly business.

Adderheart had not been present for the fluffy she-cat's death, though he had practically heard exactly what had occurred. Coalbelly had been able to detect the probable cause of death and what had actually happened.

Supposedly, his mentor had been hunting near the border. It had not been a pleasant leaf-bare that moon cycle, with the hunting being difficult. Snow blanketed the ground with a light, sparkling grin and clouds tended to crowd the sky with a shadowy smirk.

As Juniperflight had scented a piece of prey — rumored to be a plump pheasant — the she-cat had slunk toward it, though soon she had spotted a rogue in the bushes. Supposedly, the rogue had dark, blackish-gray fur that contrasted greatly with the snowy world around them. There had been a tuft of their fur caught between her claws when she'd been discovered.

Juniperflight, whipping to the rogue and completely forgetting about the prey, leaped for them and soon enough managed to tackle the black-furred cat. Though she had greatly underestimated the power of the other cat, and they soon surged back up against the she-cat.

The rogue managed to grasp her throat in their teeth and they pulled. The she-cat had reeled back, shock and terror clear in her eyes as she collapsed, legs buckling as she had let out a strangled cry. The rogue was nowhere to be seen when a nearby patrol had rushed to her aid, only to find that she was already gone.

The usual rituals were done, though nobody besides her kits seemed that upset. She was constantly longing for the power of battle, and

most of the cats in SageClan didn't prefer to be constantly fighting with rogues or loners. Although, Cougarstar always seemed open to the idea.

A sigh escaped the pale-furred warrior as he shifted his position, gaze refocusing.

Turning slightly, Adderheart pulled himself to his paws, his back arching a little bit out of the stiffness that had crowded him while he'd stilled. His dark gray eyes glittered as he glanced around the camp. The sun above his head was now resting delicately on the horizon, gaze bright and warm as it stared upon him. Though, the light was slowly dimming.

In its place rose a darkness, a darkness only the night could hold. It had not yet completely turned, though the sky was slowly fading into pretty peachy-orange and pinkish-red tones, splattering itself across the previously pale blue sky with delicate shades and prim movements. Soon enough it would be darker — much, much darker. Yet for now, the world held the soft brightness of day still.

He stretched, a light yawn escaping his muzzle as he snapped his jaws closed a moment later.

Strolling casually to the fresh-kill pile, he surveyed his options. What was left was a decent selection — at least, he thought so. The thrush that Pantherleap had laid upon the pile was gone, though the mouse was still left.

The older warrior took it between his jaws and returned to his place, sitting down and wrapping his tail over his paws rather swiftly. He bent slightly to take a bite and then a voice broke through the silence that had blanketed his world.

"Adderheart?"

Bearpatch.

Fox-dung.

The warrior let his head bob in somewhat of an appreciative dipping of his head, "Yes, Bearpatch?"

"I heard from Antwhisper that you and a few others were on a patrol and scented blood, and it was supposedly not alike to prey's blood. Is this true?"

He nodded, letting his sharp dark gray eyes soften as too not come off to rudely as he looked up. Shadows spread across the thin-furred brown tom, already dark brown pelt appearing darker in the light that was slowly fading into the prettiness of twilight.

"It is true," Adderheart answered, another nod forming.

Bearpatch seemed to take a mental note of something, and the heir gave a warm nod, glancing down at the prey before mewing, "Did you scent anything else nearby or see any fur?"

A simple shaking of his pale-colored head did fine.

The heir shifted slightly, fur prickling, "Well, do you think you could show me where it is?"

No.

I want to rest. I want to eat my mouse in peace and without too much interruption from you or anyone, really. I want to watch the sunset and then I will go to sleep.

Would Streamfang be able to go? I think she'd know better than I would. Is that a good excuse?

Seemingly instantly his mind whipped into action. He really didn't want to get up from the comfortable position he lay in— intensified by the fact he certainly didn't want to leave the camp to show Bearpatch the place where there had been some unidentified blood. His tail with the two white stripes flickered slightly, head tipping a tad as he studied Bearpatch's expression. It was neutral and calm.

Antwhisper likely told Bearpatch that I would be able to help more since I was the leader of the patrol. Hopefully, Poppyfur was completely left out of it. We don't need this spreading amongst the rest of the Clan, and we certainly don't need Poppyfur prancing around with this sort of information at her paws, ready to be spilled at any moment.

"I think Streamfang would be able to lead you to it better than I would," he mewed carefully, being sure that his voice was smooth and even compared to his last words.

The heir seemed to take his words completely fine — "Alright, thank you."

"Thank you," Adderheart replied easily, relief crushing him. It was as if someone had lifted a weight off his chest as he watched the chunky-built heir pad away to go locate Streamfang.

Now the sun had practically slipped beneath the horizon's surface, only a slim sliver of its shimmery light remaining. Instead, now, a moon was rising in opposition, one of which seemed to be ready to take over the sky with a dark, shadowy fist.

The sky was turning much faster now. No longer did the sky hold pretty pinkish shades, peachy-orangey shades, or anything in between — now it held darker blues, and these were slowly morphing into blacker colorings. They seemed to be spreading upon the sky's surface like paint across a white page.

Soon enough the entire sky was blanketed in a similar, dark blueish-gray-black shade, and now since the sun had disappeared from the sky completely, the moon rested delicately upon the horizon. Stars dotted the dark blanket that was the sky.

In this time a few cats had passed in and out of camp, most notably those who had been on a patrol or two. Some brought prey — Shrewclaw, a pale brown tom, and Fernfall, a small, white-and-black patterned tom, had both brought back two pieces of prey each. Freckletuft, Dustshade, and Birchpaw had returned, too.

The latter held a mouse and a rabbit, which was certainly an impressive catch for the apprentice. It was nice to see the white-and-brown apprentice so pleased with one of his own actions.

Adderheart had soon finished off his piece of prey, and now he was able to comfortably settle upon the part of camp he was in. He buried his prey, watching the sky for a moment as it continued to make its daily change in colors.

The blueness from before seemingly dissipated, replaced with a dark, soul-crushing black. Now the only light came from the moon, which was steadily rising into the sky all the while shedding a pale, silvery light upon the camp, and the stars, which sprinkled minimal luminescence upon SageClan.

Eventually, the lean-bodied warrior rose to his paws, stretching once more. Arching his back, another yawn escaped his muzzle, yet this one was seemingly more tired— and so in a moment, he began to head toward the warrior's den, dipping his head to a few cats that were resting around camp and eating prey before they were off to sleep. Of course, Palewhisker had two guards set up near the camp entrance, but Adderheart was too far away to say goodbye to them.

Pushing past the combination of sticks, thorns, and brambles that made up the walls of the warrior's den, Adderheart quickly located his nest and curled up. Comfortably, he settled down, letting his fur fall flat against his lean form. Wrapping his tail around himself, the warrior laid his head on his paws.

Within moments, the pale-furred tom slipped into a pleasant slumber.

chapter three

It was much colder the next morning and immediately, Adderheart could tell.

It was like someone had let a blanket of complete and utter chilliness fall upon them in the early hours of the day, where only a few dared stay awake — and those would likely only be the guards of the camp. Perhaps a cat or two would wake from their slumber in the apprentice's den from a terrifying dream, or a warrior would rise quietly for a late-night hunting trip, but generally, SageClan was asleep.

Even Cougarstar, who seemed to always be up to always watch his Clan and be sure that nothing was wrong, was asleep.

The cold that settled upon them was biting, almost sharp-tongued if it could speak. Yet, for some, it did speak, though not in a language they could understand. It whistled furiously through the air, dropping chilly gusts of wind around the pine-tree littered territory. It howled softly. If it spoke too loudly, it would wake leaf-fall far too early. It was reminiscent of a leaf-bare's mildest day, yet compared to the rather warm days they'd been having during greenleaf, it wasn't pleasant for cats with shorter fur.

Adderheart's own paleish, creamy-brown pelt wasn't necessarily too short, and not necessarily too long, yet he still preferred the warmth of greenleaf and late newleaf compared to the biting chill of leaf-fall and the even colder nip of leaf-bare.

Though as the cats began to wake up, the coldness soon morphed into more of a crisper feeling, one that swiftly and briskly twirled around the camp for a moment before skittering away. Leaf-bare would be enraged if it heard that leaf-fall was coming far too early. At least, that's what most of the cats in SageClan believed.

Most of them didn't mind leaf-fall too much, but leaf-bare was usually a hard few moons for the Clan. Of course, any Clan would

find it difficult to survive when it was simply so mind-numbingly cold. Yet, SageClan seemed to have it the hardest out of any of the cats around.

It was a well-known fact that there were some loners and rogues that skirted the territory occasionally, and yet no matter how hard the Clan tried, it seemed almost impossible to fully rid themselves of the nasty little rogues that would dart in and out and never stop teasing warriors at the borders. As far as Adderheart could recall, there had been no official fights between them, and hardly any skirmishes for that matter – besides Juniperflight's incident. Hardly anyone spoke of that mishap.

Though, it had also been common to hear of tensions rising every few moons, particularly when it was getting closer to leaf-fall and leaf-bare. That's precisely how Juniperflight had died. The loners and rogues could survive the chillier months. They could travel as far as they wanted to try and get away from the cold. But some did not. Some stayed and bothered SageClan regardless.

Which was why most of the cats now seemed on edge about the loners. Most prayed that they'd finally be left alone, that they'd have one season pass without being bothered by the annoying loners or rogues, but the likelihood of that was low. It hadn't ever happened in the past; what would cause the loners and rogues to do so now? It was always a conversation topic that practically anyone could bring up and get immediate answers.

Adderheart managed to sit down outside of the warrior's den after pushing past the thorny entrance, a shiver trailing an icy claw down his spine. He rose to his paws, shaking out his fur — almost as if it would make him warmer — and he trotted carefully toward the fresh-kill pile.

On the top lay a mouse and a shrew, each of which had a light frost coating their pale brownish fur. The tom took the shrew and he shuffled over to the spot that he'd been in last night, settling down and curling his tail tightly around himself. He let his paw rest upon the shrew's form, hoping the frost would dissipate soon as he took the first bite of the shrew.

It had a strange tanginess to it — like someone had injected some sort of chilly liquid into its chunky, stringy meat. But, overall, it had a decent taste to it, and so the lean tom took another bite, this time chewing quicker. Soon it was simply a pile of bones, and despite the weird taste, it left upon the pale-furred warrior's tongue and in his mouth, he was overall grateful he'd managed to snag something before the pile had emptied, especially considering the chill in the air.

After a few moments, he realized that the rest of the Clan was suffering more than he had been considering the crisp air. Despite the fact that some cats were slowly rising and trotting from their dens, he noticed a white-furred she-cat with dark brownish-ginger dapples.

That was Willowdapple. She was the Clan's queen; the only one who wasn't permanent.

Of course, SageClan had two permanent queens — Tinydust and Sootdawn. The two had never really been given much of a choice regarding their rank, and although Tinydust had more time as a warrior than Sootdawn, their skills had slowly dwindled. Willowdapple tried her hardest to try and assist them if they ever needed help with things like the hunting crouch or a basic fighting stance in case of anything.

The three she-cats were close friends and had a tight-knit friendship that their mates couldn't deny. Except that nobody knew Willowdapple's mate.

And she hadn't told anybody.

If she had, whoever held her secret was trustworthy, since not even Coalbelly knew. She refused to tell a single cat about her secret and she seemed extremely private about her life in general. It was peculiar. Most cats wanted to talk about themselves, to be fawned over and to be loved by others, and their views said that the only way to achieve this was to spill thoughts and opinions till cats thought it was interesting.

Yet, Willowdapple still had rumors floating around her and she was

still a fairly mysterious figure within the Clan, and yet still she hadn't shared any information about her life regarding her mate.

Swiftly, Adderheart rose to his paws and trotted toward the she-cat, his tail flickering slightly.

"Are you okay?" He questioned, sharp gaze seemingly softening. Her belly was round with kits, he could tell, as she stumbled a little.

She nodded mutely, letting out a soft cough, "Yes, I'm okay. Just a little cold."

"Go back in the nursery," offered the pale-furred warrior, "I'll get you something to eat."

It would have been rude not to offer to help her.

The she-cat's brown gaze dawned with appreciation as she nodded, turning around and slipping back into the den. The nursery was specially protected from the chilliness, due to the fact that the kits had less of a resistance against the cold. Thorns and brambles were woven tightly into and around the sticks of the walls of the den, creating a warmth that could hardly escape the nursery.

Adderheart, shaking out his brownish-cream pelt once more, turned and trotted toward the fresh-kill pile. Though as he was about to choose the mouse from before, Briargaze, one of the newer warriors, and Brindlebreeze, a she-cat with sharp yellow eyes, bounded into camp. Their pelts were brushed with something alike to excitement as the latter approached the fresh-kill pile.

She triumphantly dropped a thrush upon the pile, followed by a frog from Briargaze. Their tails lashed like flags in the wind as they stared down at their catches. They shared a gleeful look.

"Good catches," mewed Adderheart casually. It was always good to offer a compliment to a cat once and awhile.

"Thanks!" They both practically chirped at the same time, a similar smile stretching across their brightened features as they glanced at each other.

He gave a small smile, a small nod of goodbye forming, and he chose the frog, turning and padding away toward the nursery. The warrior hoped that the queen liked frogs. Some cats of SageClan despised the creatures, no matter how plump they were. The main reason was that they were slimy, which he simply didn't understand. Prey was prey; slimy prey was, yes, admittedly, slimy prey, but prey nonetheless.

Squeezing past the entrance, the warrior laid it in front of Willowdapple, who had settled in her nest. Her belly was round and had a smooth curve as she laid out in the nest, tail still somewhat curling over her back legs.

"Thank you," she murmured, taking a bite of the frog and, ripping off one of its hind legs, she offered it to him. The warrior shook his head, though she nudged it closer, and so he reluctantly took a bite.

"When are you expected to have your litter?" The question wasn't too uncommon for the queen — at least, he assumed so, and soon after, he hoped so.

Her ears twitched, "I haven't seen either of the healers in a bit... I should probably go soon, maybe today, to get some sort of an update. But probably soon, they're pretty active in there."

A warm smile crept upon her muzzle as she gazed down at her belly, features filled with nothing but love for her unborn kits. Soon enough, she turned back to the frog and took another bite, shifting her position slightly.

"I see," murmured the pale-furred warrior, gaze flickering to the frog and then back to the queen.

A silence settled over the den, though it wasn't awkward or strange — instead, it was a comfortable, gentle silence, one that curled gently around Adderheart. It was welcomed and appreciated.

Soon enough, though, the she-cat has finished the frog and had settled down into her nest. He watched as she laid her head upon her paws and placed her tail upon her muzzle. She glanced back up at him and grinned.

Carefully, Adderheart rose to his paws and buried the bones of the frog nearby, giving her a nod, one that was wordless yet kind. He turned to leave.

"Adderheart," she mewed, and he looked over his shoulder, "thank you."

The pale-furred warrior gave a warm smile and a nod soon followed. He slipped from the den.

And as he did so, he realized that the crisp chill to the air had not left. Rather, instead, it had intensified slightly, making the entire camp a tad brisker. Everyone seemed to be a little bit faster than usual, pawsteps swift and easy against the ground, almost as if they wished to escape the minimal chill.

Adderheart decided that it wouldn't be too great to sit around camp much longer. He trotted over toward the camp entrance, dark gray eyes sweeping the area. Maybe he could hunt.

Before he could leave, Streamfang's thick white pelt with the creamy stripes upon her fur appeared from the warrior's den, and after the she-cat had located the older warrior, she charged toward him. He quickly stepped away as to not get slammed into, and she turned, tail bushing up as she stared at him. Her dark amber eyes were two identical blazes of irritation.

"Why did you tell Bearpatch to talk with me—" Her voice was accusatory and somewhat louder than what was likely necessary, though almost as soon as the words had left her mouth did Adderheart leap from his place in the camp and weave straight toward the entrance. Instantly, his breathing lapsed into a steady pace as he swerved to leave the camp.

The tom bolted off and she raced after him, though, with a cry of indignation: "Hey!"

He skidded to a stop after he'd gotten a decent bit from camp, and the russet-pawed she-cat soon stopped after him. She breathed heavily, attempting to get herself under control.

Once she did, Adderheart immediately spoke, "I'm sorry, we just couldn't talk there."

"Yes, we could've!" She answered sharply, shaking out her fur as she glared at him, "Why would you tell Bearpatch to talk to me? I didn't want to do that either, you know!"

He quickly went over her words in his mind, shuffling his paws a little as he rested back on his hind legs. Swiftly, he pulled himself into a sitting position, wrapping his creamy tail over his paws, letting his head tip a little bit to the side.

"Well, I wasn't meant to say anything about the topic in the first place, and Bearpatch got me to admit that it wasn't prey blood," he answered, struggling to keep his voice even.

She cursed softly, scuffing her paw against the ground, though her fur was still spiked up with vexation.

"I know that, but did you really have to direct it to me?"

Adderheart let his darkened gray eyes travel to her as he stated, "Who else was it meant to be? Birdwish is too young to have been asked to deal with that; it would've been suspicious on my part. Poppyfur... well."

Streamfang's mouth pressed into a straight line and her expression grew guarded within moments, tail flickering back and forth as she settled opposite him.

"But why did I have to deal with it? I know that you weren't supposed to be involved but you could've said you'd show him later."

"That would've been rude to deny him," pointed out the warrior, "and besides, it's no use delaying it. That blood could've been rogues."

Streamfang flinched and immediately he regretted his decision. The she-cat's gaze flitted away, landing upon the ground at her paws. He could almost see the memories of Juniperflight flashing in her mind and he lowered his head, ears pulling tightly to his skull. His tail

pulled tighter around his paws.

"I'm sorry."

She rose to her paws, appearing much bigger than how she actually was. Her tail was a lashing bush of fur behind her already puffed-up body. She narrowed her dark amber eyes at him, which was now a minimal simmering bowl of mild irritation.

And, simply, without any more words, the she-cat whipped around and slipped from his vision.

That was a mistake, he thought, guilt crushing him. The pale-furred warrior silently rose to his paws, tail flicking behind him as he let his dark gray eyes head to the sky.

So, since there was nothing else to do, he dashed through the small swath of undergrowth at his paws. It wouldn't hurt to do a little hunting, right?

Adderheart scented the air, dropping his jaws in order to get a better overall profile of the area. Catching cat scent immediately, he gave a soft huff, turning and skimping off.

Soon enough he emerged in a small area where the trees cleared away or rather thinned out, making it less and less woody and making it smell less and less like pines and the pine needles appeared less and less around his paws. He realized that he was near the border yet took no real notice of it. Ears pricked, Adderheart once more thoroughly investigated the area around.

No prey was nearby, although a sharp, metallic tang seemed to constantly hang around the air, almost as if waiting for the perfect moment to strike. It smelled faintly of prey, though one that Adderheart didn't necessarily recognize right away. Perhaps it was a mouse or even thrush. Those weren't the commonest pieces of prey in SageClan's territory, but it was definitely possible.

The first time that he had tried thrush had been during his apprenticeship. The pale-furred warrior didn't exactly remember how he'd actually gotten to eat it — he only remembered adoring

the taste and the texture of the bird — and so he moved on, tail flickering as he scented the air once more.

Whatever was causing the faint scent of blood was gone and with it swept a strong prey-scent, one that was eerily familiar. It smelled slimy, chunky, almost like water, yet with a more earthy tone that was soft and light compared to the blood's edged tang.

Frog.

They were fairly easy to catch, considering that most of them had slow paces regarding walking, and if not, it was easy to spring after them with a leap or two and catch up. Adderheart would admit that sure, although they could be different to actually pin due to their slippery nature, getting to one wasn't that hard.

Which was why he hurriedly skirted off to where he thought the scent was coming from.

It was a small puddle, one with greenish-clear water with algae caking the top. It seemed to have been from a rainstorm long ago, yet instead of going away, it became bigger. Dark gray gaze sweeping the area nearby, the lean tom soon spotted a small, chunky, dark forest-green creature, one with a thick build and a flat head.

If I'm close enough then I should be able to jump and pin it. Definitely hasn't noticed me... so I'm safe to jump.

With a blink, the creamy-brown warrior sprung forward, slamming a paw down on where he presumed the creature was, though it had leaped away just in time. It was a fox length or two away, and so Adderheart let out a soft growl and vaulted after it. His tail lashed behind him wildly like a flag as he managed to get close enough to pin it to the ground.

So he did.

The greenish creature shifted around, squirming for a few moments, eyes wide and bright with a fear that Adderheart would never know.

After successfully making the creature go limp, the thin tom lifted it up gently in his jaws, staring around at the area around him. His dark gray eyes were sharp, glinting in the light of day.

Then, he sprung off into the undergrowth.

chapter four

The night that Adderheart had arrived back had been rather uneventful.

It had, reasonably, been rather cold. The biting chill from before had not disappeared just yet, rather instead sticking around for a tad longer. It would certainly be pleasing to those with longer, thicker, fluffier fur.

Though Adderheart, of course, preferred the warmer weather, which was why he had slept earlier.

So he woke up earlier, too.

The sun rested delicately upon the horizon's line, letting its warm though pale rays travel and submerge the camp in a soft glow. As the pale-furred warrior exited the den, he found that although it was a tad chillier than he would've hoped, it wasn't *too* bad. It was something he could deal with.

Briefly, he considered leaving to hunt, though soon he recalled the fact that it was far too early to be leaving. If he were to do so, then there was the possibility he could get caught alone by... something.

By what? He didn't know. However, there was always that chance.

Breaking through his thoughts was a muffled, irritated hissing. Adderheart's ears swiveled to catch the noise drifting from the leader's den.

What's going on?

Almost as soon as the noise had graced his ears did it dissipate, lost to the whisking noise of the wind that filled the warrior's senses.

Confusion and something alike to concern filled the pale-furred warrior's dark gray gaze as he turned to face the den. Nothing seemed off. Nothing seemed wrong. Nothing seemed to be causing a

problem.

Not anymore.

As Adderheart turned away, his gaze caught upon Pantherleap's thick tawny pelt. What was he doing up so early?

The mentioned warrior approached the other tom, ears twitching. It was almost like he had heard what had occurred, too. Of course, neither would mention it.

"Good morning," greeted Pantherleap, head lowering in a respectful motion.

Adderheart dipped his head, tail tip beginning to flick back and forth behind him as he returned the speech back, "To you, as well."

Silence settled upon them as they stood, looking at each other for a moment. Adderheart's dark gray eyes flashed away from Pantherleap, who shifted and then looked questioningly at the entrance of the camp.

"Up for hunting?" He queried, head tipping to the side. His dark green eyes were curious.

"Sure," replied Adderheart, taking a few strides toward the entrance before he stopped. Pantherleap's face flashed with a momentary smile as he padded ahead of the pale-furred warrior.

The two slipped from the camp, immediately surveying the area around them.

"Where do you want to go?" inquired Adderheart. He wasn't just saying it to be polite; the creamy pale brown-furred warrior was genuinely interested in where the other tom wished to go.

"Where do *you* want to go?" Pantherleap looked over his shoulder, amusement glittering within his dark green eyes. It was interesting to see from a cat who had the ability to hold so much power in the Clan act so carefree.

Maybe that was why he was acting in such a way. He knew he

could potentially hold a large amount of power, and so he was comfortable with the way that he could act. But that didn't make sense. Why would Pantherleap act unlike any leader before him, much less any cat related to the current leader? And so closely related, too?

"I don't mind."

"Well, neither do I."

Pantherleap stopped, turning around to face Adderheart. His tail was raised in the air, a curious look printed upon his features. A chilly breeze swept by the two and Adderheart shivered.

"Okay, let's just head north, then," Adderheart offered and Pantherleap gave a nod, pivoting on his paw.

The warrior quickly slipped by Adderheart, heading toward the northern side of the border. It would be easier to find prey near there. Since the trees thinned naturally near the borders, it would be marshier, and hopefully easier to find prey.

Eventually, they came upon the border, and from Adderheart's observations, Pantherleap had caught the scent of something.

It was pretty clear in the way his ears flickered, the way his whiskers twitched, the way his muzzle dropped open to inhale a load of scents and pick out one, one sole scent that would help feed the Clan.

And as Adderheart followed in a similar action, his dark gray gaze swept to Pantherleap.

"Blood," mentioned the tom, ears pulling close to his tawny head.

"Fresh, too," added the pale-furred warrior, approaching the border with concern.

It was splattered across the border, shiny in the sun's pale light. Though, despite the fact it was a little bit difficult to see due to the reflection, it was clearly a deep maroon, dark and scary compared to the murky greenish ground beside them.

Adderheart watched as Pantherleap put his muzzle to the ground. The tom drew back quickly, eyes widening in some form of fear, though clearly, he was attempting to mask it.

"Rogue."

"Let's go," ordered Adderheart, already beginning to turn. His tail lashed. *I'm not dealing with this again.*

Pantherleap thought otherwise.

"What? Why? We have to investigate so we can report back to Cougarstar!"

A sigh escaped Adderheart as he spoke once more, "He's already gotten reports of... other things like this. He doesn't need more."

"Yes, he does. We need to determine whether or not this will be a problem."

"It's already a problem. It is every leaf-bare," pointed out the pale-furred warrior, ears twitching.

Pantherleap's dark green gaze softened for a moment, and Adderheart wasn't necessarily sure why. A light flickering of confusion surfaced within the warrior's dark gray eyes.

"Please?"

Begging? From Pantherleap? *Why? He* should *have control over me. Cougarstar could bring me down with a few words. Why is he refraining?*

"Adderheart?" Pantherleap stepped forward.

He's giving me the choice.

And, only because of that fact did Adderheart agree.

Pantherleap stepped across the border first, pawsteps light and smooth as he crossed.

Adderheart followed, a little more tentatively. He had never crossed the border before, and especially not with someone as high-ranking as Pantherleap. Technically, the leader, deputy, heir, and healers could do whatever they wished regarding borders. Pantherleap was not one of those.

Yet still, the tawny-furred senior warrior crossed.

He put his muzzle to the ground first, attempting to figure out where the tangy liquid was coming from. Adderheart followed obediently.

Pantherleap, after a few moments, paused underneath a large tree. After the trees thinned near the border and the ground turned a little more marshy, the trees seemed to thicken once more. And thicken they did.

They seemed to be popping up every few moments with thick undergrowth surfacing between them — undergrowth thicker than the swaths in SageClan.

It was sort of overwhelming, really, to be used to such an open landscape, and then instead be shoved into an area without that level of openness. The ground seemed much closer to his pale fur than he had expected, and he shivered involuntarily rather frequently, though not because it was cold. If anything, they were more protected here from the chilly winds than if they had been in SageClan.

The thickness of the trees allowed it to be protected, and if one were to slip in the protection of the undergrowth, it was fairly easy to get away from the winds. Though, there was no way Adderheart was about to go into the undergrowth. He wasn't, necessarily, a good or a bad tracker, and if he were to lose Pantherleap in the brush of this unknown territory, there were simply too many outcomes.

So as Pantherleap continued on, Adderheart swerved and skimped by the undergrowth, choosing to stay nearer to the trees and the pine needles that came with it.

Pantherleap drew himself up and Adderheart stopped behind him.

"This is where the trail ends," he stated, glancing back.

"What? How?" Adderheart edged ahead, putting his muzzle to the ground. No matter how much he sniffed around and on that area, it was gone. The scent was gone.

"How is it gone?" asked Adderheart again, padding back and then studying the area around.

There was nothing special about the trees nearby. They had long, thin limbs with many pine needles on their branches.

"I don't know," answered Pantherleap, a frown whisking upon his muzzle. Adderheart felt the need to continue finding this scent, this blood, this rogue, wherever they were. It'd taken probably longer than it should have for the pale-furred warrior to detect the scent trail.

But now that trail was gone, why were they even out here?

Can we get into trouble with Cougarstar because we didn't find anything?

"Are we going to have to report this back to Cougarstar? That we didn't find anything?" Adderheart blurted, turning to Pantherleap.

The tawny-furred warrior's tail flicked as he turned around, sniffing the air once more as if still looking for a trace of the rogue's smell. He turned back to Adderheart with a deepened frown.

"Yes. We have to."

"Why?" insisted Adderheart, "you know I'll get into trouble with him. You won't. *I* will."

"What?" Pantherleap stopped, turning back to look at the other warrior. "That's unreasonable. We'll both get into trouble. Or *I'll* take the blame, if it's such a problem for you."

Adderheart flinched, dark gray eyes widening at the tom's

sharpness.

With that, the older warrior turned around and quickly sprung off through the thick undergrowth.

Adderheart stood there for a moment, sniffing the air as if he expected the blood scent to suddenly appear once more with a sharp yowl.

It did not.

After hurriedly launching himself after the other tom, Adderheart found that Pantherleap was much quicker than he had expected, and so he hastened his pace.

Soon enough, Adderheart was slowing down behind Pantherleap. Neither of the two seemed to be very good runners, though they certainly weren't the slowest cats in the Clan.

As the tawny-furred warrior approached the border, Adderheart slowed behind him, skidding to a stop.

Pantherleap turned slightly, checking for the warrior, and after a momentary pause, he lunged back through the bushes.

And after a while, they'd arrived at camp.

Adderheart attempted to calm his breathing, which, although under control, was rather quick for his liking. He preferred calmer, more even breathing, one that allowed him to seem cool and composed around others at all times. The pale-furred warrior's dark gray gaze flitted around the camp.

The pale sun hung delicately among a dimmer sky. It, of course, was caused by the approaching leaf-bare and the sharp winds it had brought.

Particularly, those sharp leaf-bare winds were swirling around the camp at the very second that Adderheart and Pantherleap approached, almost as if it had been waiting for the two's entrance.

Pantherleap swerved toward Cougarstar's den, which was

underneath the Highrock. A few small pebbles littered the outside of the den from the many times that Cougarstar and the past leaders had climbed it to speak to the Clan.

As they trotted toward it, immediately, a sharp hush seemed to settle over the den.

Adderheart tried to share a momentarily confused glance with the other warrior, but the dark green gaze of Pantherleap did not meet his own.

"Cougarstar?" Pantherleap spoke in an even tone. "We have something to report."

A moment passed, and within that moment the den seemed to be full of some sort of shuffling and moving motion. It was soft, muffled, almost as if something had been pressed against moss of some sort to ensure the noise wasn't as loud as it would've been.

"Come in."

Cougarstar's voice was sharp, quick, and almost... raw. Almost like he'd been talking for a while.

Or maybe not talking. Maybe arguing.

Pantherleap stepped in first and Adderheart followed with a swift motion, his tail whipping behind him.

The den was rather small, though big enough to fit several cats — at least four or five could easily fit in. The top of the den was low yet secure, full of a bunch of large rocks that laid overtop of each other.

"What do you want?" His gaze was almost bored though masked with darkness and gloom as it flitted to meet Pantherleap's.

It darkened at the sight of Adderheart.

"We scented rogue's blood at the border," Pantherleap began in an even and calm tone. "I decided it would be best that we investigated."

"Without my permission?" Cougarstar cut in, rising to his paws and lifting his head. His expression was almost sardonic.

Pantherleap stared evenly back at his brother. He continued, "The blood lead further into the territory and unfortunately, the trail stopped around sixteen tree-lengths after the border's official ending."

Adderheart prayed he could stay silent. There was no way this would end well if he ended up speaking, for he knew that he would be far too proud of his abilities in order to actually get a point across to Cougarstar, who clearly wasn't willing to listen. The pale-furred warrior simply sat down, coiling his tail around his paws as if to protect himself from the words that bubbled within his muzzle.

They would stay at bay for the time being, Adderheart knew. He had that level of control over himself.

"Why was I unaware of this until after the search was conducted?" Cougarstar stepped forward, slightly narrowing his eyes to stare down his muzzle at his tawny-furred brother.

"For if I had done so, the supposed rogue could have already been gone."

Good answer.

Cougarstar's tail whipped in the air behind him, fur slowly beginning to rise as he spoke once more, "*I* conduct search patrols in this Clan, Pantherleap."

The warrior gave a nod.

"*You* are not in control of my patrols, Pantherleap. You are not my deputy nor my heir."

His voice was not ragged. Instead, it deepened to an irritated growl, and he stalked further forward. His sharp green gaze seemed to grow sharper by the moment as he shoved his muzzle in his brother's face. Cougarstar's tail brushed up behind him, as did his tawny fur. It seemed to cover his strong build.

Pantherleap blinked, giving a simple nod, though he didn't back up from Cougarstar's advances. "Indeed you do. But if Adderheart—"

"Adderheart," Cougarstar dragged the name from his muzzle with something like a snarl, facing the pale-furred warrior.

The mentioned warrior looked up at Cougarstar. He let his head tip curiously, though he knew what was coming.

"You know that I am the only one who sends patrols out in this Clan," the leader began, swerving to slowly stalk forward. Soon, his face was in Adderheart's. His sharp green gaze glittered. "Why didn't *you* stop Pantherleap?"

Good question. Why didn't *I?*

As the pale-furred warrior quickly formulated an opinion, the den settled in a cold silence. The leader's gaze was a plume of raging flames, hot and flashing as they stared down the pale-furred warrior.

Then, Adderheart looked up. His dark gray eyes were simple as he spoke.

"He was the closest thing to your permission that I was going to get. It would take too long to get back to you or to send one of us back and it was far likelier that we would've lost any trace of the scent if we had reported back to you."

The tom whipped around, tail whisking directly in Adderheart's face.

"Adderheart, you're dismissed. Sort out the warrior's den immediately. It needs cleaning and new moss. Coalbelly has some in her den."

Apprentice duties? That's not fair.

But the pale-furred warrior knew better than to argue, and so he simply rose to his paws and pivoted upon his paw, exiting quickly.

As soon as he left, a sharp, irritated noise cut through the silence

that had settled upon the den. Adderheart, not wishing to hear much more of the conversation he knew was going on, swerved swiftly toward Coalbelly's den.

He wished that Twilightcloud were around. Coalbelly would likely gossip to anyone in her vicinity about his punishment.

Which he didn't even understand in the first place. It wasn't like he and Pantherleap could go *back* on their decision. A huff escaped him, though the pale-furred tom resolved his expression a moment later. He let his tail fall to the ground and let his pelt smooth down.

As he poked his head in, his gaze landed upon a she-cat with thick, charcoal-tinted fur. Darker stripes littered her soft fur, and she had lighter paws and ears.

Coalbelly. StarClan curse me.

"Coalbelly? I've come to retrieve moss," stated Adderheart, careful to ensure his voice was smooth.

The healer turned, brown gaze confused as she questioned, "And why would be?"

The warrior swallowed and answered swiftly, "To help sort out the warrior's den."

A light of understanding dawned within her gaze, turning it a warmer honey-brown as she turned, slipping back further into the den.

Like all dens, the healers' den was a den made of tightly-packed thistles, sticks, and brambles. Though, the healers' den was set up to be bigger than the others. It had a main area, where the ground dipped below. It had been like that for a long, long time, and it was rather small in order to conserve space.

It also had two small offshoots, one that was extremely close to the main area — it held Twilightcloud and Coalbelly's nest. Anyone could see directly into where they slept, which wasn't really an issue. Just two moss nests. The top of the den was rather close to the nests, which made it virtually useless for anything besides its

original purpose.

The other was a little larger, with more of a better entrance. It held

Cats who were sick did not sleep in the healer's den, for it could contaminate them too easily.

Cats who were sick did not really... exist in SageClan, necessarily. They were around, and they happened, but Coalbelly was extremely skilled at healing and was raising a fine healer in Twilightcloud.

If someone were to get injured, they slept in their respective den.

If someone were to get sick...

Cougarstar would decide what to do with them.

"Have fun."

Coalbelly nudged a bundle of moss forward, ears twitching as she studied Adderheart for a moment.

The senior warrior took the bundle, dipped his head toward the she-cat — in respect, not in thanks — and with a swift movement, Adderheart slipped away and headed toward the warriors' den.

chapter five

Upon entering the den, Adderheart discovered there was a cat in the warriors' den, which was to his utter disappointment. He had hoped there wouldn't be anyone inside, so he could do what he was meant to and then leave.

But StarClan curse him, that could not happen today. Of course not. Coalbelly first, now this...

Just let me be.

He prayed and hoped that the cat inside of the den wouldn't say anything. Although, he knew better than to assume that Coalbelly wouldn't be saying anything to at least her apprentice, who surely would at least slip up around Bearpatch, and then who knows where the information could go from there.

"Why do you have moss, Adderheart?"

His tail with the two white stripes whisked upon the ground as he turned to face the warrior who had spoken. It was Dustshade, a fluffy white tom. His paws, belly, and muzzle were all a dark russet.

The warrior's dark amber eyes glittered.

"I'm cleaning out the den," the pale-furred warrior answered without missing a beat.

"And why is that?"

Fox-dung. He knows I'm not nice enough to just clean out the entire den on my own.

"Assignment."

Adderheart replied simply, setting down the moss and turning to a nest with crusty, old moss. There was no need to say anything more. He took some and placed it in a smaller pile next to the new,

fresh moss.

Dustshade's head tipped as he stood, continuing, "And why is that?"

Just leave me alone!

"Pantherleap and I crossed the border to investigate a rogue scent," the warrior answered, working to try and distract himself from the small forms of annoyance that was worming its way into his system.

It was easy enough. He should've understood it.

"Really? A rogue scent?" Dustshade didn't sound surprised nor angry, rather almost boredly intrigued.

Irritation bubbled hotly within him, and so Adderheart did not answer; instead, he whipped his tail, mewed a quick "Get out, you're taking up space" and began making the next nest.

Dustshade's amber eyes darkened but he did do as he was told, performing a quick exit.

Finally.

After that, Adderheart resolved to work on the nests in complete and total silence. If he dare say something or do something too loudly, then surely it would increase the chances of someone else figuring out what had actually occurred.

Briefly, while in the middle of putting some more moss back in his pile, the tom wondered how everyone else would be reacting to what had occured. He was meant to be the example, or one of them, for the Clan. He was meant to be the intelligent, quiet, hardworking warrior who never stepped out of the line, and who never would do anything without Cougarstar's permission.

Not anymore. He thought, almost miserably as he stepped back to look at what he'd done.

The majority of the nests were well-structured, with a decent chunk or two of moss surrounding a few main sticks. Some had more than others, as Adderheart had replaced the same amount of moss. If he

would have done any less to the ones that had more moss, then nothing would end well. Although, he knew that it likely wasn't too big of a deal.

Well, for some of the warriors.

He knew better than to indirectly challenge another senior warrior. Pantherleap likely wouldn't be angry, though he was sure that others would be. Marigoldcry would surely throw a fit and probably report him for something he didn't do to Bearpatch - better yet, report him directly to Cougarstar. The thought caused a bubble of irritation to fill up his belly.

And still, it was unfair to the younger warriors that they didn't have as much moss as the others.

But then again, it wasn't his decision to make, and so Adderheart finished the nests.

The lean warrior quickly disposed of the older moss, deciding to press it into certain spots of the ground where cats walked the most. It wouldn't necessarily be a good thing to have crusty moss in the warrior's den, but he wasn't going to throw away... okay... moss.

He swerved to exit, though as soon as he did, a swarm of warriors brushed by him to enter their newly created nests. The first to shove in was Marigoldcry, followed rather primly by Fluffyflame, and after that, the pelts blurred together in a mix of white, gray, russet, brown, black, and patterned shades.

A thick tawny pelt paused at the entrance.

"Thank you," mewed Pantherleap, dipping his head to Adderheart, and he disappeared into the den.

The senior warrior smiled and then trotted back out into the camp, glancing at the darkening sky.

Surprisingly, it had taken nearly the whole day. A darkened blue shade quietly leaked into a pale, dim pale azure color. Soon enough, the warrior watched rather quickly as it morphed into pale peachy tones, ones that were bright and grinning among a pinkish sea.

As the pale-furred warrior approached the fresh-kill pile, he surveyed it rather quickly, for if he were too slow, then it would be darker much quicker than he had intended. And so it was a swift decision that he picked a vole at the base of the pile. He swerved and headed to sit nearby, choosing a small spot near the entrance of the camp.

He dug in rather slowly, hoping to savor the vole so he could stay up and wait until the den and the cats inside calmed down. He figured that they'd be busy with trotting around and ensuring their nests were at their best.

Voles were certainly not his favorite of the usual prey that SageClan had, but it wasn't really an issue. He'd take it over not eating any day, and besides, Milkfrost and Vixenfeather would enjoy it -

Milkfrost and Vixenfeather.

He'd practically forgotten them completely and briefly, now that they had surfaced in his mind, he wondered where they were.

Maybe they... they found a nice home among some of the rogues.

Adderheart doubted it, really. They had probably met some unfortunate fate out in the forest, hopefully not by the fault of the rogues, and as much as he wanted to help them, wherever they were, it simply would make no difference. The two she-cats willingly broke rules that Coguarstar had set down, even if it were ones that they did not agree with.

It didn't and wouldn't ever matter if the two she-cats had disagreed with the rules, because Cougarstar set them and nobody broke Cougarstar's rules. Ever. What happened to them was a prime example of why nobody ever broke the rules.

In Adderheart's mind, the cats of SageClan disagreed with Cougarstar's ruling. Or, well. No. Most cats of SageClan didn't appreciate *some* of Cougarstar's ruling, regarding things with the treatment of the elders he was sure. Nobody had seemed extremely positive or supporting of the leader's choice after he'd told them both to get out of the camp.

The pale-furred warrior's tail sharply flicked back and forth as he studied his prey. It looked plain, simple, calm, and compared to the warrior's mind, it was almost a parallel opposite. Ideas ran through his head, following a course that had marks from the many ideas and thoughts that had come before it.

If Milkfrost and Vixenfeather did find a place among rogues, then surely they were the ones used for the blood, since they seemed old.

It wasn't fair of him to make the assumption but he didn't care. Adderheart huffed with frustration. If only he had just investigated a little longer, he probably could've found some other clues.

Maybe it was them that had crossed the border and the blood was actually theirs.

Then where'd they go? And then why did the trail disappear?

His ears twitched as he continued to speculate, though he was sure it would end in no ideas and no leads. Though, would anyone in the Clan care about the elders?

Cougarstar clearly didn't, so why would anyone else stray from his ideals?

Because if they strayed too far, then they'd be in trouble with Cougarstar. And since nobody else was willing to step up against him, it'd be a solo act - a solo act of defiance. But in the rest of the Clan's eyes, a solo act of idiocy.

The only way change could come was through an uprising, but why was that necessary?

Nobody would find it necessary, except perhaps some of the younger warriors that were frustrated with being woken up early. Though, mainly, it wasn't like SageClanners were being treated badly. They had prey every day, and although there were hard leaf-bares, hardly anyone died from any diseases.

Coalbelly's skills were as good as they could be, and Twilightcloud certainly wasn't too far behind, considering that she was training underneath the skilled healer.

Momentarily, his train of thought directed toward the concern over the roles of toms and she-cats within the Clan, though he forced it away. That was irrelevant right now and it was useless to bring it down the path of thought.

Although it's definitely not fair, he told himself, as if cleansing himself from the thought that he'd dismissed it too quickly.

His tail flickered a little as irritation bubbled within him for a moment.

If Cougarstar was passive on a topic, would anyone care about it?

No. He knew that answer.

The cats of SageClan, even if they did not agree with it, followed Cougarstar's every opinion like an order... even Bearpatch. Now that Adderheart considered it, the heir was almost comically passive. He seemed to have no opinion on *anything*. Not on the elders, regarding the most recent events. And honestly, the pale-furred warrior wasn't really surprised. Why should he be? Bearpatch had never spoken out on any other topics before.

So, why change things now? Why *not* follow his father's every opinion? Besides, it wasn't like Cougarstar could revoke his heirship-

Wait, no. Cougarstar did what he liked - not even what he liked, what he wanted to do - without much consideration of anyone else's thoughts or ideas on it.

Then whatever Bearpatch did could be scrutinized, and in the same thread, he could lose his position for it.

His apprentice could likely be punished too and he likely didn't want Finchpaw punished.

No wonder he doesn't say anything. Although, I don't think it's just that he doesn't share his opinions. He doesn't really have any in the first place because he doesn't know how to form his own. He listens to everything Cougarstar says so he just doesn't know. He's afraid he'll lose his position.

And, well, on that thread, whatever anyone said or did could be scrutinized.

An icy claw trailed down his spine, causing the pale-furred warrior to shiver.

Then why did Pantherleap stay behind with Cougarstar after I got sent out?

He knew that he was putting himself in the direct rays of Cougarstar's anger. They're brothers. Besides Tinydust or Bearpatch, Pantherleap is the cat that knows him the best. Maybe Palewhisker, too. But why would Pantherleap do that?

Adderheart knew that Pantherleap didn't do things for fun or 'just because'. The senior warrior wasn't just that type of cat. Every action and phrase was well-planned and justified with some sort of reasoning that he believed was correct.

Just like Adderheart's own actions.

The pale-furred warrior's tail made a swift whisking movement upon the ground as he stared back down at vole. His dark gray eyes focused once more on it. Only a bite or two had been taken out of it. Despite not being very hungry, he ate the rest of it with a few quickened bites.

His gaze drifted to the sky. It was a blanket of darkness, one that concealed the warmth of day so that nobody could see it. A silvery sheen was spread upon the camp, as now the moon was hanging a tad toward the horizon, offering a sharp smile to Adderheart. Its dim light rested delicately on the the rocks and pebbles of the leader's den.

And just like that, Cougarstar swept from the den.

His tawny fur was ruffled, ears pinned to his head, and his sharpened green eyes held daggers. Tail lashing with urgency, the leader sprung from the base of the den and trotted hurriedly toward the entrance of the camp.

Why is he awake?

Almost a moment too late did Adderheart realize he'd be spotted by Cougarstar.

He's going to ask me why I'm awake. Fox-dung.

The pale-furred senior warrior rose to his paws and he slipped closely to the camp's wall. The thorns and brambles dug mercilessly into his pelt, but he couldn't risk this. He'd surely be doomed then.

Cougarstar stormed out of camp, his tail whipping a charged storm of anger as he left.

He didn't notice me... how?

Adderheart was a pale-furred warrior among dark, gloomy, gray shadows.

Among darkness, lighter colored things or cats should be easier to find. So how come he didn't see me?

Was he really that focused on leaving the camp...?

The warrior dismissed it, letting his gaze turn to the middle of camp. Almost immediately did it begin to glaze over as he was submerged momentarily back into his thoughts.

Though, as the leader's tail whisked from sight, Adderheart heard a loud, furious call, presumably from Cougarstar, echo back to him.

"*Tinydust!*"

All of Adderheart's senses said to go - not even to just go. All of his senses and all of his instincts said to run, to sprint, to dash after the leader and see what was wrong with the leader's mate so that she'd be out of camp. They pulled harshly on his tail and curled tightly around his legs with a strong, pulling force.

But logic tugged him back with a hiss. He couldn't go. He'd be punished far worse than just cleaning out the warrior's den for a day. He couldn't risk anything. He wouldn't only be risking being punished, but also his status in the Clan, and truthfully he found it very important and necessary that he had that sort of respectful and

calm aura around him.

And so the warrior carefully extracted himself from the thorns. One still pricked into his flank, and so he turned and twisted for a moment, opening his jaws a little wider. Spotting it, he managed to pull it out.

A tiny spark of blazing hot pain lit up the pale-furred tom for a moment and he stumbled, tail lashing in an attempt to stabilize himself. The pain dulled after a few moments and he stood, glaring at the wall of the camp. Returning his dark gray eyes to the place where the thorn had been, he found that a small trickle of blood was dripping from it and staining his creamy fur.

Quickly, he drew his tongue over it, displeased at the metallic tang that swarmed his senses. Ears twitching, he lifted his head. Now the moon was edging closer and closer to the horizon, its light seemingly dulling.

A light sigh escaped Adderheart's muzzle though, quickly, he returned his expression to a simple one. If he were to attempt to get back into the warriors den, then he'd have to be silent. Or, as near to silent as he could get.

If he were to be too loud, he'd wake everyone, and then surely Cougarstar would be enraged with him - more so than how furious he likely was already. Ears twitching, Adderheart let his pawsteps grow light and soft, and he tried to quell the flickering of his tail as best as he could.

It was something that the tom did extremely frequently. Many knew that those who were nervous had little actions that they did to try and calm their nerves, like flickering their tails, unsheathing and resheathing their claws, or scenting the air every few moments.

But everyone knew that Adderheart wasn't necessarily nervous.

It was almost like something he did to refocus or recenter himself - perhaps it was to ensure he was keeping on top of everything around him. The constant movement kept him at top condition regarding his attention span.

He flicked an ear sharply and let his tail brush softly against the ground for a moment.

So, he carefully headed toward the warriors den. Adderheart slipped in, dark gray gaze sweeping the area every few moments to ensure he wasn't about to step on anyone's paws or tail.

Spotting his nest, the pale-furred warrior headed over, edging over a few more stray limbs as he settled down. Letting his tense body relax, he curled his tail around himself and laid his head on his paws.

Almost as soon as the warrior's breathing lapsed into a steady, calmed pace did he fall asleep.

chapter six

Rising from his nest and a well-deserved slumber, Adderheart's muzzle tipped toward the sky, legs poised out in front of him in a stretch.

He resumed a normal position and carefully picked his way around a few cats that were sprawled out comfortably. A few of their muzzles were cracked open, a snore or two escaping every few moments, though it wasn't loud enough to break out from the dull background noise of the morning.

The warrior exited the den swiftly, glancing at the sky as he did so. Peachy tones were beginning to fade away, being replaced by a pale bluish shade. A few puffy white clouds drifted pleasantly above his head, smiling warmly down upon the somewhat-chilly camp.

Along with the pretty, pale leaf-fall sky, he was surprised to see several apprentices already up.

One of which was an optimistic apprentice named Finchpaw. The white she-cat was Bearpatch's apprentice, which wasn't very common. The heir didn't get many apprentices throughout their lifetime simply due to the fact that most of the leaders believed they were too busy with heir-ly duties to bother with a measly apprentice.

Although, the rumor said that Cougarstar was furious with his son's absence in the normal Clanly duties, which caused him to be given Finchpaw.

Nobody was really too surprised that having an apprentice did nothing for Bearpatch. It appeared that way, anyway. He didn't participate much in Clan training and usually handed off his apprentice to one of the senior warriors who happened to be taking their apprentice out to train, too.

So really, Finchpaw was stuck with a mentor that didn't do

anything for her.

Adderheart felt bad about it, though of course he couldn't really speak up or say how he felt on the situation. The she-cat would just have to get through training the best she could. The other warriors that were training her weren't too bad, as she was still getting the experience of a normal apprentice. It was just that her assigned mentor wasn't really her mentor.

She had several, and while Adderheart wasn't one of them, it was frequent that he'd be asked to train.

Well, not as of late, likely due to his cleaning out of the warrior's den.

Shaking his head, the tom curved toward the fresh-kill pile. Surveying it for a few moments, his dark gray eyes narrowed as he caught a few snippets of conversation.

"...early leaf-bare!"

He froze, body stilling. He didn't recognize the cat who was speaking but he did catch more of the conversation.

That's none of the apprentices I saw earlier and it's definitely not Finchpaw.

The next words were a hushed, almost nervous whisper: "Because of...? Rogues...!"

An irritated huff came next. Adderheart wished to turn around and stare at the cats who were speaking but the tom knew he couldn't. His tail swished as he carefully backed away from the pile. He didn't need to eat.

Not yet.

"Adderheart?"

He glanced to the voice that called his name. It belonged to a thin, small, black-and-white pelt. That was Fernfall, another one of SageClan's senior warriors. His tail flickered absently as he tipped

his head.

"Yes?" The pale-furred warrior approached Fernfall, who stood nearby a muscled, freckled she-cat and a fluffy, white-furred tom.

"We'd like to ask you to assist in today's training, as Bearpatch is not present," stated Fernfall, light blue eyes simple and guarded.

Adderheart considered the question, though he was surprised. There were other warriors who could be chosen over the one who had to clean the entire warrior's den. Although, it would be good to get out of camp for something that wasn't patrolling or hunting, however, he didn't know if he'd suffice for their training. If it was hunting training, he'd be okay. Tracking was something he could do fine, too.

"It's fighting training," added Freckletuft, a gentle smile stretching across her muzzle. She seemed to be edging around a sharp version of the pale-furred warrior as if she expected him to lash out at any possible moment.

As much as Adderheart disliked fighting, he nodded.

"Excellent," mewed Fluffyflame, "then we will leave immediately."

Bumblepaw, Swallowpaw, and Birchpaw were siblings and rather close ones at that. For most of their apprenticeship, they'd begged to train together - in hunting, in fighting, in tracking, in everything. Their mentors were slowly attempting to crack down on it, but it was difficult when they insisted so persistently on it.

The three cats rose up excitedly, padding swiftly toward the entrance with Finchpaw bouncing along behind them.

"Let's go!" chirped Bumblepaw.

Swallowpaw rolled her eyes. "Just be patient. They're coming."

Birchpaw's tail lashed. "I'm gonna beat all of you!"

Finchpaw, always realistic, commented, "We'll see about that."

Adderheart headed forward, hoping to get going, though Fluffyflame swept by, though not in a hurried fashion. The large and fluffy tom glanced to each apprentice, giving them a nod. They nodded back.

"Race you."

The pale-furred tom caught the words of Birchpaw as he spoke to Finchpaw. The she-cat glanced at him, narrowing her green eyes as she studied him, almost as if she was calculating the race to the last detail.

"You're on."

Apparently, Freckletuft and Fluffyflame had caught it too, for the latter took off into the territory.

Adderheart launched himself forward, paws landing with a thump on the ground as he sped up to keep at a matching pace with the other cats. Fernfall, out of the loop, hurriedly sprinted ahead to catch up, lapsing into a comfortable pace beside the pale-furred warrior. Bumblepaw and Swallowpaw were not necessarily the greatest runners as they were desperately trying to keep up behind the two warriors.

Birchpaw streaked ahead, tail a wildly waving flag among the quickly-moving surroundings. The spaced out trees of SageClan's territory blurred together, flashing by with darkened smiles and pleasant waves of their branches in the light breeze. They ran and ran, Finchpaw slipping behind until she seemed to put on a burst of speed, skidding ahead of the white-and-brown apprentice.

"No!" Birchpaw cried breathlessly, trying to bolt ahead. He tripped over a root, though, and slammed into the ground.

The apprentice let out a yowl of pain, tumbling away and landing at the base of a nearby pine tree.

Finchpaw reared on her paws, whipping around and dashing back to Birchpaw. Her green gaze was bright with confusion and worry as she loomed over him.

Adderheart skidded to a stop beside the apprentices a few moments later, the rest of the group catching up shortly. As Bumblepaw began to gently question his brother, the rest of the cats backed off. It appeared as if Birchpaw was okay. Bumblepaw's tone was soft and pleasant as he spoke to Birchpaw.

"You're going to be fine," soothed Bumblepaw.

Crossly, Fluffyflame stared at Finchpaw. His bright amber eyes were sharp and irritated as he spoke.

"I'm sure he expects an apology."

"He knows it wasn't her fault," interjected Adderheart simply, turning to glance at him with a carefully guarded expression.

Fluffyflame's tail lashed as he shot Adderheart an exasperated look. "Doesn't mean he won't get an apology."

"Adderheart, you can pair with Finchpaw, and Bumblepaw and I will individually train," cut in Fernfall, her voice giving nothing away. "As soon as Birchpaw is alright, Swallowpaw and Fluffyflame can work on group training."

At the words she spoke, Birchpaw rose to his paws, padding over. "I'm okay!" he reported with a little nod, a smile surfacing on his face. "My paw hurts, but that's okay. I'm so gonna beat Swallowpaw!"

The she-cat rolled her eyes, muttering, "Mhmm..."

Fluffyflame and Swallowpaw swerved off, slipping behind a few trees in order to have some form of privacy. Perhaps to form a plan, Adderheart supposed, as Birchpaw and Freckletuft padded in an opposing direction. Fernfall glanced at Bumblepaw and the she-cat flicked her tail for him to follow.

Adderheart glanced to Finchpaw, giving her a polite smile. She grinned back at him, apparently excited to begin training. Due to the fact that they had trained before, it wasn't too different for them to be chatting between fighting sessions.

But Adderheart wasn't really up for chatting today, and so he flicked his tail a little too sharply at her.

"I want to start with a basic fight to judge your skill," he stated simply, though it wasn't really a command, more of an open request.

Finchpaw gave a nod, green eyes glittering for a moment in the pale leaf-fall sun. The pale-furred warrior's tail brushed against the ground as he waited for it to begin. The she-cat appeared to be calculating something-

No. Not anymore.

Adderheart sprung backward, for the she-cat had launched herself at him.

He dropped to the ground a few moments after, trying to think of what she'd do next. Jump again, maybe? No, he doubted it. The mentors discouraged reusing moves right away because it could trap them in loops. If she sprung again he could reprimand her, but then again, the *other* apprentices thought all was fair in fights.

Finchpaw began to circle him, to his surprise. Not many apprentices used that move.

The senior warrior's tail lashed as he squinted at her, watching as her white-and-ginger form swept by. If he could find a pause in her lapse of running, then he could jump out. The she-cat didn't pause however, and so Adderheart decided it would just be best to leap out anyway.

When he did, he tumbled right into her. *Whoops.*

Huffing, he sprung to his paws, swiping at her with sheathed paws. With a swift move, Finchpaw snapped at him with her jaws and he backed up, narrowing his eyes. He swerved, leaping to the side, and then with a swift movement, he swiped his paws at her belly. Quickly, before she could fall down onto him, he rolled out of the way, breathing heavily to catch his breath. His belly seemed to writhe with hunger.

Pushing himself to his paws, he whipped around, tail harshly lashing through the air. The she-cat had attempted to drop down on him, but had been a mere moment or two late. Dark gray gaze flashing, Adderheart swiftly backed up and right into a bush, ears flickering and twitching as he waited for her next move.

She advanced slowly at first, and he continued to back up slowly, knowing at the most that if he were to run, she'd spring forward. She had the upper paw now. However, within moments, she was running toward him. Though, at the very last moment, she lifted herself from the ground and soared upward, landing behind the warrior. His mind, dulled by confusion and hunger, whipped around, and realized a moment too late he'd fallen into her trap.

A moment later he was pinned beneath the she-cat.

This is why I don't battle train.

Her green gaze was bright as she stared down at him, and after a moment she stepped off him. Adderheart rose to his paws, shaking out his pale creamy-brown pelt. He wasn't ashamed at his loss. He had expected it, after all, for the tom wasn't the greatest fighter. It was partially his fault, though, because he frequently chose not to be aggressive in battle, and that ended in some problems.

However, it wasn't him chosen to go and battle most of the time anyway.

"Excellent job," he mewed politely, and she dipped her head. "You've improved."

"Thank you," Finchpaw answered in the same tone of politeness. A silence settled between the two.

"Adderheart? Finchpaw? We're going to head back now!"

That was Fernfall, voice simple and easy among the light breeze that skimped around the territory. His ears swiveled as he turned to the source of the noise and soon found that she was likely behind or nearby the few pine trees that rose high beside the two cats.

So soon?

The pale-furred warrior padded around the trees, peeking out on the other side to survey Fernfall gathered with the rest of the apprentices. He glanced upward. A midday sun rose into the sky, glimmering with a pale, sharp light.

Had it really been that long?

Adderheart flicked his tail, mewing a "Let's go" to Finchpaw, who trotted up to pad beside him. The white-and-ginger she-cat padded up beside him and Freckletuft turned around, sharp brown eyes curious.

"How did she do?" She asked, speeding up a little bit to skirt away from the apprentice's ears.

"You four can go hunting." Adderheart caught the drifting tone of Fluffyflame, and shortly after he picked up the sound of pawsteps pounding against the ground. As he cast a glance over his shoulder, he spotted Fernfall and Fluffyflame speeding up to catch up with the other mentors. Well, one official mentor.

"How did Finchpaw perform?" Fluffyflame's amber eyes cut into Adderheart's dark gray gaze.

He blinked, meowing, "She did well. Beat me - I think she's ready for a mid-assessment soon."

"What? Really?" Fluffyflame questioned incredulously. "*Really*? She's only eight moons!"

"Apprenticeship lasts six, usually," commented Fernfall, ears flicking back and forth.

Adderheart's tail flicked. "They're all eight moons, and they probably deserve some sort of boost to push them through the rest of it."

Freckletuft gave a nod, adding, "Birchpaw seemed excited before training, and after he'd injured himself I expected him to do alright, because obviously I can't expect him to do *excellently*, but he didn't do very well in our training session today. Well-" she stopped, tail lashing in frustration. "No. It wasn't that he didn't do well, it's just

that he's been a little out of it, y'know?"

Fluffyflame shifted. "Yeah, but that doesn't really mean they deserve to get their mid-assessments so soon."

"It's not that soon," remarked Fernfall. "I had mine right around this time."

"And you're a skilled warrior," reflected the fluffy white warrior. "These are apprentices, likely at a lesser skill level than you were at."

The she-cat looked away, flattening her ears.

Oh, please. Adderheart glanced irritably to Freckletuft, whose expression was cleansed from any emotion. He quickly wiped his face, dark gray eyes now sporting a simple, guarded expression.

Freckletuft let a wisp of something cross her features, and the she-cat mewed, "We'll decide later. Besides, we'll need Cougarstar's opinion as well."

Oh. Fox-dung. I forgot about that part.

For an apprentice to have a mid-assessment, which was, in essence, the middle point of their apprenticeship, Cougarstar had to approve it. A simple concept, perhaps, but it was rather difficult to get him to do so, because he hardly ever gave solid answers for it.

The mid-assessment was just a scaled down version of the final assessment, which proved to be incredibly difficult for the majority of cats. Many had to retake it several times before they could officially be accepted as a warrior.

Adderheart only took it once.

It did not only test physical skills. It tested mental and emotional abilities as well as decision-making skills. Different scenarios were presented for each apprentice, but generally, not many passed the mental abilities section, nor the decision-making skills. It wasn't that they were dumb, it was simply that the test was *extremely* difficult.

Adderheart passed both sections.

Expectedly, it had been astounding to the rest of the Clan that he, a quiet apprentice, had passed both sections. Of course, everyone pinned it on Juniperflight, and at the time she had been very proud of him. Though, she believed it was simply all due to what she had done to train him. His input and effort did nothing for him; it was all her work that made him the great warrior he was.

Debatable, he knew. Would he dare bring it up? Of course not.

However, after Juniperflight had passed and Adderheart continued to show excelling qualities, it was clear that it wasn't influence from his mentor, nor from any cat around him. It was just how he was and that was how he managed to get a decent position within the Clan. It was a path any apprentice could take, though not many actually followed it.

Assumedly, that was how the majority of the intelligent senior warriors had risen, though Fernfall and Freckletuft had climbed the ranks simply due to their pristine personalities. Fluffyflame, although not a senior warrior, was fairly well-known, as was Marigoldcry, and of course Pantherleap fit in that category, though he had a boost, due to his relation to the leader.

Some of the younger warriors were clearly attempting to take that path, with kind smiles and masked expressions, however some of them went a little... overboard. Being too kind showed that one was trying too hard. Being too quiet showed that one was opinionless, and for that reason many chose a louder route.

And, swallowing a laugh, Adderheart realized that was likely what Cougarstar preferred about his son.

"Are you done yet?!"

The giggle, though far away, broke the tom from his thoughts. He jolted a bit, blinking once or twice.

"We should go," commented Fluffyflame sharply, turning away from the rest of the group with a swift movement of his form. Fernfall

speedily shuffled after him, Freckletuft a tad slower, though still rather quick, leaving Adderheart to lunge to catch up.

A little bit away lay the apprentices - not lay, rather stood, actually, for their ears were pricked.

Despite the giggle he'd heard earlier, Adderheart couldn't help but feel as though this was a show they'd put on in order to show they had been working, when they'd clearly not been. And he wasn't really that angry about it, instead found it amusing.

Approaching the clearing, Fluffyflame swerved ahead, ears twitching as he surveyed the cats.

"Did you catch anything?" he demanded.

"No, we got distracted," Birchpaw blurted, glancing from Finchpaw to the two other apprentices. They were all standing in the middle of the clearing, posture rigidly straight. "And we couldn't find anything, so," added Birchpaw with a convincing nod.

"I have a feeling that's not what happened," murmured Freckletuft, but the she-cat still flicked her tail and turned off to head back to camp. The apprentices jumped up, all sharing a similar look, one that was shiny and bright with amusement, tinged by satisfaction.

They leaped through the bushes, swerving around a few pine trees. Adderheart sprung after them, slamming his paws down on the ground, though a bit weakly. Hunger gnawed ferociously at him. It was confusing as to why they wanted to head back so soon.

Perhaps they were worried about missing something. He dismissed it. They hadn't likely hunted at all and wanted to get away from the scene of the crime, so getting back to camp was crucial.

Adderheart snickered.

chapter seven

Birchpaw was the first to dash into camp, followed by Swallowpaw and Bumblepaw. Finchpaw raced in after them, calling something that fell upon ears that were not listening. The apprentices all ran toward to their den, seemingly discussing something for a few short moments. Birchpaw whipped around, the late sunhigh sun reflected in his gaze.

He skirted over to Freckletuft and the other mentors that had taken a slower approach toward the camp. Despite the original pace back to camp being rather fast, each of the mentors had slowed down eventually, Adderheart being the first to do so, for hunger gnawed incessantly at his belly and caused his actions to be slower than usual. Fernfall and Fluffyflame had struck a little conversation where Freckletuft had stayed silent, Adderheart choosing the same option.

"Can we have something to eat?" asked Birchpaw, head tipping a little bit with curiosity. Fluffyflame opened her jaws to answer, however the apprentice's belly grumbled. Adderheart glanced behind him to spot all three apprentices gathered at the entrance of their thorny den.

Freckletuft answered immediately, tail flicking decisively. "Yes. Share, though, and be sure to offer something to Willowdapple."

Birchpaw's expression brightened. "Of course!" Whipping around, Adderheart watched as the patched apprentice dashed off to share the news with the other apprentices. Within moments they all gave a silent cheer, headed toward the fresh-kill pile to choose something delectable.

Fernfall gave a dip of her head to each cat, not saying another word as she padded off. Freckletuft was swift to follow, head bobbing in a polite yet brisk motion, turning away. Fluffyflame dawdled, however, glancing sharply at Adderheart before spinning on his paw to hurriedly head off.

Well. Okay.

Adderheart, now alone, was glad to feel the familiar, gentle silence of introversion settle upon him. It was usual for the pale-furred senior warrior to be alone the majority of the day, and most of the time he preferred it to chatting idly with cats who did not care for his daily activities.

It wasn't too surprising that he was able to move toward the fresh-kill pile without being interrupted by many, even less surprising that he was able to choose a mouse without being interrupted. Strength had slowly drained from his features throughout the day, and it had likely caused some unforeseen issues during training.

Perhaps it wasn't the best idea to skip my usual meal in the morning.

He speculated absently, settling nearby with the mouse. Dark gray gaze sweeping the camp, he shifted a little as if to find a more comfortable position, taking a bite. It had a strange twinge of coldness to it. It was most certainly leaf-fall now, for a crisp breeze seemed to continually dance and spiral through the camp, brushing up his pale creamy-brown pelt. The skies were pale blue, the nights cold and chilly.

But it was not time for leaf-bare just yet. Leaf-fall still had to run its course, cause a few chills, and only then could leaf-bare come. The prey would soon be dwindling, however, for in SageClan, the prey *always* seemed to leave far too early.

Streamfang emerged from the entrance of the camp and he shivered involuntarily. He'd almost forgotten their earlier conversations. He couldn't help but feel as though that was so long ago. It was as if moons and moons had passed...

Milkfrost and Vixenfeather.

It was only natural for his mind to jump onto the next thought that came to mind, and that, consequently, was the two missing elders. Had anyone seen them around? Adderheart couldn't recall if he'd scented them around, though was fairly sure nobody cared- nobody *seemed* to care.

His tail flicked sharply around his paws, fur fluffing up a bit more. Streamfang's dark amber gaze landed upon the tom for a few moments. Panic seemed to flit throughout her expression, though a stoic gleam soon took hold of her features.

Adderheart met her gaze, attempting to keep his own features simple. However, she broke eye contact, rapidly padding off. Worry creased his muzzle. Everyone seemed to be angry with him. Why? Was it because of what he'd said to Cougarstar, and the punishment to follow it...? Shouldn't the dens' cleanliness make up for it? Or did it not matter because he was forced to do it? He thought... he thought...

"...*stop* it!"

"No, I *said* that you needed to-"

"*Stop*-!"

The leader's *den?*

His gray gaze switched to the den. No other sound came from the den, besides a loud shuffling of paws, likely, or perhaps positions. Adderheart looked away. The camp was near empty, despite it now being a bit before sundown, besides Willowdapple, who was stretched outside of the nursery. As he glanced over her rounded form, the she-cat gave him a genuinely sweet smile, and she slipped back into the nursery.

Is everyone avoiding me?

Despair spiraled within him.

What did I do?

A cold silence laid down next to Adderheart, seeming to seep into his fur. The warrior slumped a bit against the ground, laying his head miserably upon his paws. Why was everyone so distant? Everyone was always distant in SageClan. Why? What had he done?

How could he fix it?

If he couldn't fix it, he'd just work harder. Harder until they respected him again. No, but that didn't work, because it wasn't like they disrespected him now. Right...? Nobody disliked him that much to disregard his opinions.

Well. Cougarstar. But he disregarded everyone's opinions, so that didn't count. Streamfang still appeared to be angry with him even their 'incident' had been a while back. Not that long, but long enough that it should be forgotten. And what had he done to Willowdapple?

He closed his eyes, sniffing a bit. Maybe the cold breeze that nipped at his pale brownish-creamy fur could whisk him away. Then he wouldn't have to deal with this entire situation that he didn't even know how to solve and he didn't even know what started it and he didn't want to be in it and he just wished that cats would be able to stop acting so *guarded* all the time even though he did the same and-

And, just at the right moment, Pantherleap emerged from the leader's den.

No, not emerged.

He was *thrown* from the den.

The large tom landed outside the den with a *thump*, a near-inaudible hiss sounding from the den. His breathing was heavy as he scrambled to his paws, pelt disordered. His expression was scattered and flashing as he hurriedly scanned the camp. He unsheathed and sheathed his claws rapidly, appearing to be in a state of panic. *What happened?*

Only one cat could throw a tom as big as Pantherleap.

And that tom was one equally as big as Pantherleap.

Cougarstar.

A deadly cold chill ran down Adderheart's spine as his head jerked upward to watch. *Why?* He couldn't think of any reason why. Why? Why? *Why?* To his surprise, however, Pantherleap lunged across the

camp, limbs shaking. Instantly he settled down beside Adderheart, tail wrapping tightly around his lean form.

He couldn't ask. He wouldn't. It wasn't appropriate. Pantherleap was far higher than he on the scale within the Clan. Although, the other tom had to trust Adderheart at some level to sit beside him, right? If not, he would've just sprinted to the warrior's den. Likely, to avoid being spotted by other warriors. An unexpected pang of sympathy shook him as he glanced to Pantherleap tentatively.

"Are you okay?" The question hung in still air, and thankfully, Pantherleap's sharp intelligence was able to determine the fact that Adderheart had likely assumed what had occurred.

The reply was startling.

"Just... no, I mean- I'm okay, just in pain- ah... a bit." The reply was strained, as if he was holding something back, and the pale warrior wasn't really too surprised. Pantherleap was a large, tawny castle, with tall, thick walls, and it seemed as though they had doubled in this situation. An unexpected spiral of understanding coiled within Adderheart.

Adderheart gently nudged the last few bites of the mouse over, despite the grumbling of his belly.

"We can go to Coalbelly and Twilightcloud," offered the senior warrior politely, unsure of how to deal with the situation. His tail flickered absently behind him.

Pantherleap seemed to sink into the mouse quickly to fill his muzzle so he didn't have to speak any longer. "I don't think we can."

The brownish-cream warrior didn't want to push or harass Pantherleap, though he was still curious as to why they couldn't see Coalbelly and Twilightcloud. They could always lie and say that he'd tripped on patrol and that was the cause of his pains. Or, they could just say he'd... actually, no. That was probably the only thing that would work, for they couldn't say that Cougarstar had chucked his brother out of the den.

Pantherleap swallowed anxiously, stiffening beside Adderheart as the leader exited the den. His green gaze was a familiar burning blaze of rage, features and movements brusque in nature. The large tom passed by Pantherleap and sent him a blistering glare, one that could scorch an apprentice's confidence within moments. However, Pantherleap simply seemed to take a stronger pose.

The thick-furred tawny leader marched furiously out of the camp, tail whipping a storm behind him. Adderheart thought he could pick up the familiar snarl of the large leader as he stomped out, and soon after his departure, Pantherleap's posture slumped again.

They sat there for a while, not really speaking, however it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable for either tom, for a rather pleasant and soft silence had settled a pale blanket upon them. Adderheart curled his tail around his form, for it had flickered absently every now and then, though soon enough he had laid his head upon his paws. A moon rose into a darkened sky as Pantherleap did similarly.

The sun had long slipped beneath the horizon, its pale tones that had stretched far across the sky now dimmed to shadowy shades. Stars now peeked delicately from behind wispy and shadowed clouds, glimmering brightly upon the piney territory.

"I said to hurry up!"

Adderheart's ears pricked and he jerked up a bit.

I must've dozed off.

He glanced to the side of him, spotting Pantherleap still slumbering. His form rose and fell at a delicate, gentle pace, paws twitching every now and then as if he were in a dream.

"*Wait*, we should-"

"We can report it to *Cougarstar*!"

"Nobody's gonna be awake!"

What the-

Into the camp marched three cats, each of different brownish tones. Two green gazes followed by a dark blue one swept the camp, excitement bubbling within their colored depths. Scents of all kinds wreathed around them, curling tightly around their paws and following them. One, most notably, held the sharp, edged scent of something alike to blood.

Fox-dung.

Adderheart's paw knocked against Pantherleap's leg, inching a bit back into the barrier of the camp. Due to the fact it was a bunch of thistles and thorns, his pelt itched with the feeling of seemingly hundreds of sharp pricklings digging into his pelt.

Pantherleap, beside him, jolted awake, dark green gaze a jumbled mess of confusion as he looked around. After spotting Adderheart's motioning to follow, the tom practically shoved himself into a shadow that fell right atop both toms.

"Briargaze, you're bound to wake the camp!" called a soft, muddied brown tabby tom, particularly who went by the name of Mudstripe. Beside him, Beetlepath stared around at the camp as if expecting someone to leap out at them.

However, there was no way that Adderheart nor Pantherleap would move. Their light-colored pelts were already enough of a distraction.

"I'll be fine," purred the mentioned she-cat. The spotted warrior's tail whipped excitedly as she approached them. Mudstripe, who was Briargaze's brother, shifted a bit.

"We can tell him tomorrow," he offered. "Besides, he'll be angry if we wake him up."

He's not even in camp. Fox-dung. He can't be 'woken up' because then we'll have to explain.

"I want to tell him now!" Briargaze's expression morphed to a deep frown.

Beetlepath stayed silent, ears twitching as Mudstripe rolled his eyes.

"Come on. He'll be angry! He doesn't care about the rogues enough to be woken up about them."

Rogues? A deadly cold shiver trailed down Adderheart's spine. Were the rogues back so soon? Were those scents from before actually the rogues? No, it couldn't be. It was early for that. It was barely leaf-bare!

"He's got to care," insisted the she-cat earnestly.

"He will," Beetlepath commented. "Just not right now. He wants to sleep, probably. We should go to him in the morning, and besides, we'll probably get our pelts clawed off."

Brairgaze snickered, but Beetlepath did not.

A rather thick silence settled upon the cats, three of which just sort of stood around for a few moments longer. None of them made an effort to leave or go to their dens or their nests.

When are they going to leave?

Adderheart couldn't help but shift uncomfortably in the silence. Some silences, like the one that had laid itself gently upon the two toms from before, were nice and pleasant. This one was not. His pelt prickled.

Pantherleap sniffed beside Adderheart and his heart leapt into his chest.

Had they heard?

Of course, Beetlepath, ever observant, glanced in their direction, but his attention was quickly drawn away.

"Come on, let's just get something to eat!" Briargaze's chirp broke the camp.

Beetlepath's gaze swept toward the she-cat and Mudstripe scoffed, hushing her softly. The three cats all padded over to her, spotting the mouse she had.

Adderheart held his breath. Would they finish this and then leave? He shifted and a thorn dug into his pelt. Swallowing the faint cry that rose within him, the pale-furred warrior closed his eyes for a moment.

Instantly, a swirling vortex of emotions overcame him. His belly churned anxiously as he inched around a bit more, as if expecting the emotions to go away. Instead, pain flared through his flank and he squeezed his eyes closed tighter.

All sorts of emotions surged within him again and his pelt fluffed up.

Adderheart, just stop. Nothing's wrong.

He felt a tail brush against his side and he looked over, dark gray eyes sharpening. *What?*

Pantherleap motioned soundlessly at the three cats. They seemed to be finishing up, for Briargaze's head was tilted toward the warrior's den. The she-cat's pelt was smoothed against her form.

They watched as Beetlepath carefully rose to his paws, headed for the warrior's den. The warrior swerved in, tail whisking as he disappeared into the den. Briargaze dove after him and Mudstripe followed, however the muddy-brown tom seemed to survey the clearing once more.

Mudstripe's tail tip flicked once, twice, three times, and finally he turned away and slipped into the warrior's den without another word.

Adderheart exhaled, letting go of a breath he wasn't aware that he was holding. Pantherleap slumped to the ground with relief and Adderheart quickly inched forward, away from the sharp brambles and thorns that dug into his pelt.

His throat felt dry, as if his voice was a river and a drought had tainted the world. He glanced to Pantherleap, who appeared to be exhausted. A frown deepened his expression. Adderheart approached the pale-furred tom carefully, lifting a paw. Nudging

him gently, he studied his reaction.

Pantherleap's head jerked upward, and at the sight of the warrior, he relaxed a bit, however he still seemed on edge. Pulling himself away from the bramble wall, Adderheart noticed blood trickling down his back.

Concern flickered through him and he reached forward, planning to clean it. He couldn't just leave his injuries like that.

Pantherleap pulled away, seriousness lighting his green eyes. "D-don't," he croaked, voice strained.

Hurt flashed through Adderheart as he studied the warrior. "W-what?"

What is that meant to mean? Don't what? Clean his injury? Does he not want me to help? He just sat next to me throughout the entire thing. I thought that he was fine with me-

"Tomorrow. Patrol. Hunting."

Oh.

Adderheart's ears twitched and threatened to flatten but he forced them up, and noticeably Pantherleap's whiskers drooped as he pulled himself to his paws.

Pantherleap inched closer to Adderheart and whispered, "Be careful. We can plan it so that w-we go on the same-" his voice shriveled up for a moment and Adderheart's brows knitted. "S-same patrol, just don't wait forever. If we need we can always meet up at the... the..."

"Toward the middle of the territory?" murmured Adderheart questioningly, head tipping.

"Sure," breathed Pantherleap, head bobbing in a slight nod as he glanced away. "We can talk more later. Just... not now." The warrior glanced at the sky, where a shimmery moon rose high into a blanket of darkness.

Adderheart nodded understandingly. It was unlikely anyone was

watching them, but they both needed sleep, especially after the whole experience with the three warriors. He couldn't believe they'd not noticed.

The warrior turned away and padded toward the warrior's den.

"Adderheart?"

He turned.

"Thanks."

Pantherleap's voice was simple, light and genuine as he spoke. It gently floated across the clearing, carried by pleasant though somewhat chilly winds, offering the warm words on a sharp platter of a leaf-fall breeze.

Adderheart's ear twitched and he offered a tiny smile. "Thank you, too."

The creamy-brown warrior looked at Pantherleap for a few moments longer, who met his gaze.

Then, he turned and carefully slipped into the warrior's den.

chapter eight

Adderheart knew that waking in the morning would probably be one of the hardest things he'd do all quarter moon. There were so many things that could go *wrong* with a simple motion, a basic action, a quipped mention of something in someone's speech...

It was reasonable that he was pleased to wake before the sunrise, then.

The pale-furred warrior rose carefully, edging from the den. His ears twitched as he slipped from the den. Memories from the night before rushed back to him, feelings immediately clambering up into his throat. Swallowing heavily, he shifted and padded toward the fresh-kill pile.

On the horizon, there was no sun, rather instead a moon, one that delicately held itself up. However, it wasn't going to last for long. Even though no sun existed just yet, its faint rays of peachy pinks and charming oranges slowly crept upward on the opposing horizon. The moon glared sharp, icy daggers at it, however, it couldn't stop the morning's approaching steps.

Picking up a thin, russet squirrel from the pile, he swerved toward the place where he and Pantherleap had been trapped previously. Tufts of light fur were stuck in the wall. He cursed under his breath. Had nobody noticed yet?

Quickly, he removed each piece, the other tom's scent wreathing around him. Adderheart scraped at the ground, shoving the tufts of fur into the ground before patting the dirt down firmly on top of it.

He finished his squirrel soon enough and for good measure, he buried the bones on top of the fur.

"Adderheart?"

Pantherleap!

The warriors' gazes met.

Immediately, Adderheart pulled himself to his paws, padding over to the tom. He stood at the fresh-kill pile, glancing back down to the heap of prey. It appeared emptier than before as if someone had stolen some of its contents after Adderheart had taken his squirrel.

"Hungry?" Adderheart prompted.

Pantherleap turned away, shaking his head decisively. He trotted toward the entrance of camp and Adderheart followed him, watching with guarded dark gray eyes.

The warrior slipped through the camp's entrance, leaving Adderheart to quickly trot after him.

He supposed that it would take a bit to get to the forest, and that was fine. He was sure that Pantherleap knew that, too, for the original pace they both set out in was a steady yet brisk one. It was clear that Adderheart did not want to waste the time they had before dawn, and he hoped that Pantherleap agreed.

Heading out before dawn not only secured the fact that it was unlikely anyone would see them. It also helped confirm the idea in both cats' minds that they could spend a bit longer chattering while still using the patrol as a coverup. Most patrols went out precisely at dawn, so if the two wanted to make it on time without being suspicious, they could likely talk a bit past dawn.

Adderheart watched as Pantherleap jumped nimbly over a small, fallen log, covered in moss. On its somewhat rotten surface was the light tinging of prey-scent. It was earthy, deep, pleasant and full. Likely a vole or a ground-bound squirrel, he knew, yet there was no sight of the prey.

As the two continued on, the pale-furred senior warrior found that there were plenty more smells like that. Drifting, yet present, as if the creature had once been there yet now had disappeared for reasons unknown to the cats.

Passing through a small clearing, Adderheart caught sight of a

mouse, scuffling at the roots of a pine tree. Some of its needles had fallen delicately to the ground, seeming fresher than a lot of the other cushiony pieces of the tree. The mouse didn't seem to notice the prickly objects all around it though, for it kept digging at the base of the tree.

Pantherleap's tail kinked over his back and his even steps immediately stopped. Adderheart's ears pricked and swiveled as he slowed, studying the creature. It appeared thin, with gaunt little features and a whip-thin tail, however that was usual for the browny-gray mouse.

Within a few more moments, Pantherleap had dropped into a hunting crouch. Though, the other warrior could see that the nearby tree was going to knock straight into Pantherleap's strong form, so he circled where the mouse was. If he could get on the other side of both the mouse and Pantherleap, then perhaps the latter would scare it to him.

Adderheart's pawsteps and movements were muffled by the blanket of pine needles as he managed to situate himself opposing the mouse. If only his fur wasn't so bright, then maybe he'd blend in a little better. His dark gray eyes flashed as he watched.

Pantherleap crept forward, tail fanned out behind him. However, as predicted, the warrior ran straight into the tree branch, instantly altering the mouse of his presence. With a horribly high-pitched squeak, it whipped around and sprung straight toward Adderheart.

Who, consequently, hadn't been paying attention.

Hurriedly, Adderheart leaped after the mouse, as it had scuttled off into a nearby collection of bushes He could hear Pantherleap's pawsteps behind him, each of which was just as quick to catch up with the mouse. Adderheart's tail whipped as he finally located the mouse. It was swiftly navigating its way through the forest. It swerved through and around trees, not stopping at all.

And neither did Adderheart.

Though the mouse, seemingly growing tired, slowed, and it turned

to a tree, attempting to scrabble its way up. Adderheart bared his teeth and launched at it, claws scraping at the bark. At the frenzied squeaks that followed, he realized he'd caught the brownish-gray creature between his claws.

Huffing, the warrior delivered it to death. Pantherleap rushed in a moment later, attempting to get his breathing under control. His green eyes swept to the bark, scored with claw marks and splattered with a small amount of blood. He glanced to Adderheart, a small smile rising upon his features.

"Good... catch..." he managed between breaths.

"Thanks," Adderheart answered, just as breathless.

For a moment, the two stood, attempting to get their breathing under control. At least, enough so that they weren't huffing every time they attempted to speak. Adderheart sat down and leaned a bit against the tree behind him, whiskers twitching as Pantherleap took a similar position.

"So?" Pantherleap had recovered, clearly, and quickly, too. His gaze was guarded once more.

"So what?" Adderheart questioned back, sniffing a little as if to clear himself of the huffing for one last time.

Pantherleap shifted. "Questions? Do you have any?"

"Oh. Um," Adderheart spoke in a quieter tone than usual, though not because he didn't want anyone to find out. He knew there was nobody in the forest at this time, for barely a ray or two of sunlight was spread across the territory. He was quiet because he didn't know what else to say.

Pantherleap's tail flicked.

"What happened...? And, what's been happening," clarified the warrior quickly.

The other tom gave a light sigh. "I can't... I can't say, Adderheart."

"What? Why not?"

"I just can't," replied Pantherleap, now wrapping his tail tightly around his paws. It appeared he expected an onslaught of questions, however, Adderheart noticed this, and he wasn't planning on pressing the tom if he was uncomfortable.

Adderheart started, "Well, I..."

"Thank you, Adderheart," he cut in.

"For what?" The pale-furred tom was confused by the change in subject... I'll get back to the issue with Cougarstar later. He doesn't seem very trusting. Just like me.

"Helping me," Pantherleap stated simply. "For helping me when you could've left me to be discovered by... by..."

His gaze clouded for a moment and he looked away, noticeably swallowing heavily. Adderheart's gaze flickered with concern, though it too became a high-walled castle as he waited for the tom to continue. He's talking about when I shoved us both into the thorns, isn't he?

"Thank you for not leaving me to be discovered by Beetlepath, Mudstripe, and Briargaze. You could've left me, probably to get some sort of fame within the Clan, since they surely would've told the Clan within moments. And, considering your position with the recent cleaning of the den, I'm mildly surprised that you didn't."

Adderheart's ears twitched. "Me allowing you to be discovered may have heightened my position, though it could've also painted me as horrible for leaving you to be discovered."

Pantherleap shifted, eyes flashing. "So you did it for yourself in the end?"

"I- That isn't what I meant, Pantherleap," Adderheart answered, tail wrapping tightly around his paws.

The warrior went silent.

"I meant... I..."

Fox-dung. I've trapped myself!

Anger spiraled within him at his idiocy. This had been his chance to make it up to him, or at least try and clear some of the cloudiness of the situation up, and *now* here he was, immediately dropping mistake after mistake without even seeming to notice till it was done. How come he wasn't being as sharp as normal? His tail thumped against the ground.

Focus, Adderheart! He reprimanded himself harshly, forcing his claws to stay sheathed. *Don't mess up anymore. Just clean up the situation- the mess. The mess you've made. It's fine. It's fine.*

Pantherleap's expression was carefully guarded, eyes trained on the warrior opposing him.

"I didn't do it for myself, because if I had, I would've claimed you'd injured me after shoving me into the brambles. You know Mudstripe, Briargaze, and Beetlepath would have instantly told Cougarstar, who wasn't there, and that would've ended even worse for you. I could've lied easily through that-"

"But they may not have believed you," Pantherleap interrupted. "As I see, your standings within the Clan aren't... well."

Adderheart's ear twitched as he swallowed. "Admittedly, that is my fault," he replied, "however, I'm sure those three - ever caught up with gossip, as I'm sure you'd know - wouldn't miss a chance to ruin your reputation. Considering the fact that Briargaze barely was able to understand the fact that they weren't going to go tell Cougarstar, I'm sure she would've taken it upon herself to tell.

"As well," he continued, hardly pausing to breathe, "I feel as though Beetlepath and Mudstripe would've believed you if you fought otherwise, however, it would've been likelier for them to tell Cougarstar if there would've been an additional event. And, since he wasn't there, StarClan knows what could've happened."

Pantherleap's eyes were still guarded. Adderheart decided that

completely spilling everything wasn't a good idea, and instead, he decided to swap to conversation of the rogues. Considering the fact that's what the three had been chattering about, it'd likely be a good idea to get Pantherleap's opinion on it.

If he'd share.

"The rogues that they were talking about... was a bit concerning," he added, unsure of whether or not his swapping of the topic was obvious or not. "Considering we investigated some of the scents and found nothing... I mean, if there's new rogue scenting, perhaps the one we found wasn't just a fluke."

Still, the warrior did not answer and frustration bubbled within Adderheart. *Come on, just give me your side!*

"It's hardly past leaf-fall," Adderheart commented in a quieter tone. "If the rogues come this early, then surely leaf-bare is soon to sweep upon us..."

"The herb stores aren't doing well," Pantherleap murmured, voice tentative as he spoke. "Coalbelly is displeased with the loss of herbs so early in the season. And, besides, herbs don't grow back. If we lose them this early and we get attacked by rogues soon, we'll... we'll suffer, surely."

Adderheart nodded. He hadn't known of the issue with the herbs. "I didn't know about the herbs."

"Nobody does," Pantherleap looked up, green eyes flickering with a nervous light. "Nobody does. Well, except you, me, and who you'd expect to know."

"Why do you know? I thought Cougarstar wouldn't trust you after what you did at the border. He seemed really angry for just a little investigation," the warrior questioned, tipping his head.

Pantherleap's tail swept around his paws. "You know how he is with his borders and patrols, especially considering the rogues' early arrival. He keeps dragging me into these... meetings, with Palewhisker, Coalbelly, Twilightcloud, Bearpatch, Tinydust, and

sometimes Sootdawn. Usually, it ends in... arguments."

The tom's voice dropped significantly, ears pulling tightly to his skull. "And, last time... Well, you saw were that got me."

Adderheart's own ears dropped to his head, concern flickering within him. "You should get out more. He won't have as many opportunities to bother you."

"Not all the meetings are with me," Pantherleap clarified, "some are strictly Cougarstar and Tinydust, who I'm sure you know agrees with him regardless of what he says. Bearpatch just sits there and offers little opinion, Sootdawn following suit if she's present. Palewhisker sits there too and pretends to listen but really, he's making choices for himself. I mean, so is Cougarstar.

"If I'm in the meeting, it's not that important, because if it was, I wouldn't be there. Usually, it's me or Coalbelly to question him."

Coalbelly? Adderheart's ear twitched curiously.

"Coalbelly, I know," Pantherleap gently tapped his tail on Adderheart's paw. "It's a surprise to me, too. She appears cold or sharp most of the time, though I've seen her spirited side. She seems to understand where I come from, though she isn't as outspoken as - I guess - you could say I am. Since the rest of the den is mostly silent, my measly additions count as outspokenness."

"They consider you outspoken?" Adderheart tried to keep his mouth from falling to the ground. It seemed as though they were pinning things unfairly on Pantherleap.

"*Cougarstar*," corrected the warrior, tail flicking back to curl around his paws. "Cougarstar considers me outspoken, and considering his headstrong tendencies, he's a tad hypocritical."

Adderheart almost said "I'm not surprised" but managed to conceal it.

"Besides, Cougarstar'll-"

A rustle sounded nearby and instantly, Pantherleap sprung to his

paws and attempted to launch up a tree. However, it was clear his skills were not so sharp, because he fell to the ground immediately. Terror clambered into Adderheart's throat. He couldn't climb either. Where was this rustle coming from?

"Get into the bushes," ordered Pantherleap, unsheathing his claws as if he was preparing to jump up again.

"You're doomed to get caught if you jump up!" Adderheart exclaimed, racing forward to the base of the tree that Pantherleap had situated himself at. His tail whipped back and forth as he glanced over his shoulder.

"I said go!" Pantherleap hissed, kicking at Adderheart. Stumbling backward, the warrior hurriedly retreated to the bushes, crouching between a few branches. Pine needles pricked sharply at his paws. The pain that lightly speckled around his paws seemed much more real than a casual stroll through the forest.

Pantherleap attempted to leap up the tree once more, but his claws scraped uselessly against the piney bark and he fell again, this time with an audible groan following. Worry filled Adderheart as he watched the warrior rise once more, shaking out his tawny fur.

Huffing a few breaths, Pantherleap eyed the tree. A few branches appeared easier to climb on, so the tom launched upward. His paws flailed in the air for a moment as he attempted to navigate his way closer to the tree. His left paw caught on a branch and he gripped it tightly, wringing himself up and onto the branch. Breathing heavily, the warrior's gaze swept around.

How did he do that?

"I don't see anything!"

Pantherleap's soft voice drifted across the small clearing.

"Neither do I!" hissed Adderheart, tail fanning out against the ground. Suddenly, he realized he'd abandoned his mouse in the middle of the clearing. It lay limply, unmoving, simply still like a stone.

Above, Pantherleap shifted in the tree, also noticing the creature.

I forgot all about it! Adderheart thought, frustrated.

Pantherleap inched a bit toward the end of the branch and the pale-furred warrior's heart leapt into his throat. No way would he jump off to get the mouse after struggling to get up into the tree in the first place. He couldn't and he wouldn't. No. *I won't allow it. He's going to get injured and he'll pass it off again just like last time!*

Above the horizon glowed a pleasant sun, a bright grin printed across its features. It allowed a somewhat dim, though still rather luminescent light to flood the clearing. It flicked throughout the branches and the trees, slanting directly into Pantherleap's green eyes. They glimmered shinily, shimmery in the dimmed golden light.

He's going to jump off!

Alarm flashed in Adderheart's dark gray gaze, terror spreading through him like forest fire.

"Pantherleap, don't you dare-"

He didn't listen.

The pale-furred warrior continued to head toward the ever-narrowing branch, pelt being scraped by the needles upon its branches on the way. He pressed closer to the tree, tail kinking over his back as he narrowed his eyes at the mouse. And with a swift motion, he attempted to leap off.

Pantherleap hung suspended in the air for half a moment and then he fell.

Plummeting to the ground, the tom suppressed a cry of pain. Instead, he let out another hiss of agony, and Adderheart sprung from his hiding place. Rushing over to the other warrior, he crouched down, peering over the tom.

"I said not to," Adderheart hissed, "are you okay? What hurts? That looked painful. I said not to jump!" His tone drifted to a snarl as he

stamped his paw sharply against the ground, gaze glazed with terror.

Pantherleap murmured something in a raspy, husky tone, struggling to his paws. His tail waved dismissively.

"What? I didn't hear you," Adderheart pointed out sharply.

"I said stop," Pantherleap turned to Adderheart, gaze edged. "I'm fine. I just f- I fell. That's all," he answered, tail whipping as he turned around. He gritted his teeth, adding another string of words as if to convince the other tom he was okay: "I'm fine- I'm fine...!"

Adderheart realized he'd likely come off too strong, so he carefully crept around the tom to face him.

"I'm sorry. I... was just worried," he said, ears lowering. He forced them up, resolving his expression to be simply concerned, nothing like the fear he'd felt a few moments before...

"I noticed." Pantherleap's tail whipped. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me. We have hunting to do, Adderheart. Bury your mouse and we can start on finding prey."

"Pantherleap, wait, are you going to be okay?" Adderheart's tail flashed in the way of the warrior.

He offered a small sigh, a light bobbing of his head following. "Yes, Adderheart. I'm okay. I just need to stop... overreacting, with small injuries like this. Coalbelly will be angry if we waste herbs."

"Waste?" challenged Adderheart.

A light smile drifted across the strong tom's features. "Intelligent, I see. I figured, with you, that would be the case anyway. But, I'll be okay. Now bury that mouse and meet me toward the border."

Pantherleap's head bobbed in a polite and respectful dip of his head. Then he turned around and plunged into the bushes.

chapter nine

Adderheart wasn't really sure if Pantherleap was actually okay, but he presumed that if he wasn't, it was unlikely that Pantherleap would be telling him that. So, he did as told.

The pale-furred warrior turned, quickly digging a small spot in the ground for the mouse to be. Scraping a bit of earth over its stilled form, he lifted his muzzle into the air. Sniffing a bit, he managed to catch the familiar smell of Pantherleap.

Leaping after it, he navigated his way through the pine-scented forest, ears pricked and muzzle tipped into the air in case he was to catch a whiff of another mouse or a different piece of prey. Considering the fact that there would now likely be an early leaf-bare, he wondered when the prey would first begin to dissipate.

He prayed it wasn't soon.

On the way to meet up with Pantherleap, he caught the drifting smell of Streamfang. He could almost imagine her thick white pelt with the cream markings, brushed up and fluffed with irritation... *She's probably still angry with me.*

And that's my fault, really. I can't go back on it. I don't think she'll do so for a while.

Heaving a sigh, he soon caught sight of a pale pelt flickering between the darkly-colored trees. The border was nearby, from what he could tell. It was dappled with a dim, pleasant light. That consequently came from the pale sun, patterning similarly on his own fur.

Jolting forward, he sprung through the bushes, skidding to a stop beside Pantherleap. The warrior seemed startled, head swinging to the side as his gaze focused on Adderheart.

"Catch anything?" Pantherleap asked in a low tone.

"Not on the way over," answered Adderheart. Pantherleap's head bobbed in a nod, eyes narrowing a little as he lifted his muzzle into the air.

Adderheart did similarly, scenting the air. Nothing seemed to come up immediately. Instead, the sharp chill of leaf-bare tainted his senses. Huffing, he swerved to the side, weaving between a few pine trees. Nothing, still, and from the irritated hiss he heard, Pantherleap was struggling too.

The pale warrior continued in the direction that he'd padded lightly off toward. His ears twitched, whiskers flickering similarly as he poked his head around a pine tree. Endlessly the dark-colored bark seemed stretch as far as he could see. It never ended nor began at a certain point and the same fact could be applied to the dark green of the pine needles beneath his paws.

Sniffing once more, Adderheart's head tipped. *Was that a scent?*

Carefully, he trailed after the scent. As he padded, though, a light cracking of a tree, perhaps just a small stick, sounded. Leaping neatly over a fallen log, he landed on the other side, tumbling to the ground. Rolling, he sprung up and looked around.

Nothing was around.

His ears twitched as he looped back to where Pantherleap was. The tom had slipped seamlessly into a hunter's crouch, paws lightly shifting upon the pine needle-covered ground. He appeared to be tracking a scent. Carefully, Adderheart slunk toward him and fell into a similar position.

Adderheart's tail tip twitched as he watched Pantherleap continue to stalk the scent. The warrior's pawsteps were unaligned, but only by a smidge. He was a decent hunter, though secretly the pale-furred warrior assumed he was better in the skill compared to Pantherleap. Not because he felt he was better, of course, simply just skill-wise.

Then, the warrior stopped abruptly.

Adderheart instantly rose to his full height, straightening his posture out as he studied Pantherleap, who did the same in front of him. *What happened?*

"There scent stops here," murmured Pantherleap, tail beginning to lash. "I thought that was another mouse."

A frown crossed Adderheart's features as he studied Pantherleap. His tawny rose in irritation and Adderheart wove beside him, standing in front of the tom. He didn't want Pantherleap to be upset, but he knew that if they didn't find anything, they'd be more suspicious than before.

And he was also aware that Pantherleap knew this.

"We have to find at least two more bits of prey," Pantherleap snapped, turning away, his tail lashing in the face of the warrior. Flinching backward, Adderheart opened his mouth to speak once more.

"It's leaf-fall, so I suppose that—"

"We have to, Adderheart. Cougarstar is already angry with me," Pantherleap insisted. "I know that if we bring back one tiny, measly, fox-dunged mouse I—"

"Hey!" Adderheart's sharp tone cut through the already edged conversation. He turned his dark gray gaze to Pantherleap's deep green gaze. Unlike his brother's, it was not a mess of flaming green rage. Instead, it was a clear, blazing flame of irritation. However, at Adderheart's voice, it stilled to a guarded green haze.

Pantherleap did not speak, so Adderheart continued.

"It's leaf-fall. We aren't expected to find all the prey in the world."

"I am," Pantherleap retorted, struggling to keep his voice under control. Notes of vexation drifted in.

Adderheart's tail flicked sharply. "Then we don't have to find two

more pieces."

"I don't know how you're permitted to waltz around the territory, Adderheart, but I must find more prey. Now if you're going to waste my *time* then I'll go." The warrior turned away, placing a paw in a direction away from him.

No!

"I'm not *wasting* your time. If you *waited* to see what I was going to say, maybe you'd not be so angry with me," Adderheart answered, swerving to stand in front of Pantherleap, who simply just went still. "If we use something else as cover, then we'll be fine."

"What could we possibly use as cover that Cougarstar would care more about?"

Adderheart blinked and Pantherleap turned to stare at him.

"Well?" The tom prompted once more, paws shifting below him. "Go on."

"Rogues."

Pantherleap shifted.

"If we insist we've seen rogues near the border, it won't be too far off. Paired with the other reports, it'll likely be believable, and considering the rumors going around about an early leaf-bare, it won't be a stretch. Plus, the herbs dying early are even another sign. He'll have to believe us."

"He doesn't have to," Pantherleap protested sharply. "He won't. What if he sends a patrol out without us in it to discover these rogues and they don't find anything?"

"Then we have to ensure that there's going to be rogues," Adderheart replied simply.

"But we can't do that. There's no guarantee of rogues and I'm *not* tempting some random cat to come and pose as some."

Adderheart's tail tip twitched. "Then we just have to risk it. There's not going to be two pieces of prey."

"Okay, so then when we have to go up and talk to Cougarstar about it, what am I meant to say?" Here the warrior put on a fake voice, one that was high-pitched and tinged with mocking. "Hi there brother! I've found some rogues at the border, and I thought you'd like to know about them—"

"I'll talk."

Adderheart's flat tone broke the silence. Pantherleap glanced at Adderheart.

"Fine."

The tawny-furred warrior plunged into the bushes, quickly racing off, and Adderheart sprung after him. He ran through ideas of what to say in his mind.

I have to be polite. Well-mannered. At least originally. Otherwise, I'll get punished again. I could ask Streamfang again. No, wait. I can't do that.

Adderheart's pale fur brushed up as he leaped over a log. Pantherleap nimbly swerved around a tree in front of him.

I have to do it myself. Pantherleap won't let me get out of this one. If I get Cougarstar to believe us, then he better send us on a patrol. I can request that we go. Or ask who he'll bring and then ask those cats to bring us.

Pantherleap huffed as he continued to run. Adderheart could hear the tom's pawsteps pounding systematically against the needle laden ground.

Cougarstar won't be happy to see me. If he's not even in the camp then we'll have to wait. That won't be good. I could tell Palewhisker... No, no. That's almost as bad, if not worse. Besides, he'll be angrier and likely will just march out on his own.

He swallowed a broken laugh, dark gray gaze switching upward. He noticed that Pantherleap appeared to have slowed slightly,

however, his pawsteps were equally as loud.

If I can't talk to Cougarstar, then I better talk to Coalbelly. She's second-most talkative at the little meetings that Pantherleap has with the rest of the high-ranks. I doubt she'd talk truthfully to me, though, considering that she also seems to have issues telling the full truth.

Adderheart's ears twitched and flattened against his head. He could see the camp's thistle-y wall growing closer and closer as the two continued to dash on and on toward SageClan's camp.

I don't want to speak, he thought with a sudden spur of panic. *I don't want to. I can't. Pantherleap's bound to be angry no matter what I do or no matter how Cougarstar reacts. StarClan curse me. Why did I do this? Why did I volunteer? If I would've just let him go and catch...*

The pale warrior watched as Pantherleap slipped through the entrance. His speed had significantly slowed throughout the journey.

There's no way he would've been comfortable running around to try and find more prey.

Adderheart realized, following up Pantherleap. He shifted uncomfortably as he headed after the warrior. The tawny-furred tom swerved toward Cougarstar's den and Adderheart's belly dropped. He watched, half stumbling along, as the tom ahead of him nudged his head into Cougarstar's den.

"Cougarstar?"

A gruff and irritated reply sounded within the den.

"Come in."

The answer was followed up by a light chirping tone, one that was pleasant and lilting.

"Feel free."

Pantherleap pushed into the den, ducking slightly, and Adderheart followed. Swallowing, he waited for a few moments and his dark

gray gaze adjusted almost instantly to the gloom within the leader's den. Inside was none other than Cougarstar himself, as well as Tinydust. They were curled up in the corner, the latter staring affectionately at the leader.

How can anyone love such an angering cat?

Dismissing the thought, Adderheart watched as Pantherleap stepped aside, tail whisking as if to present the warrior. Cougarstar's eyes darkened, tawny fur fluffing up.

"What do you want, Adderheart?" The leader lifted his green eyes upward. Each was a shiny storm.

"I've come to report rogues," Adderheart answered simply and Cougarstar's ears twitched.

"Yes, we've gotten reports already," he replied, voice almost bored. "But go ahead anyway."

Adderheart's tail tip twitched absently and his fur prickled. "Near the border, Pantherleap and I discovered more scents of rogues. They were considerably noticeable. I presume any normal warrior or apprentice could smell them. It seemed as though there had been a few rogues, possibly two or three, all passing through."

Cougarstar gave a lazy nod, eyes rolling as if he was undoubtedly uninterested in anything that he was saying.

Adderheart couldn't help but feel as though he was being ignored as he continued to speak. "The smells were considerably recent and I can only assume that the trip that the rogues made into our territory was only a few sunrises ago, if not earlier."

Tinydust's pale gold eyes shimmered anxiously as she glanced to her mate. Her voice was delicate and careful as she spoke. "Will you send out patrols, Cougarstar?"

The leader sat up, tail wrapping tightly around his paws. "Yes, I will," he answered decisively, giving the she-cat a light lick on her cheek, and she, in turn, purred, nuzzling him. A light smile rose on his features, though when his green gaze surveyed the cats inside

the den, he seemed to melt back into the familiar irritation.

Pantherleap shifted to stand beside Adderheart. The tawny tom's gaze and expression were both equal clean slates, likely due to the perfect craft that he'd mastered.

"Pantherleap, Adderheart," Cougarstar's sharpened tone broke the soft silence that had settled around the den. "You two will lead one patrol near the scents you smelled in order to investigate. If any rogues are discovered, you are to bring them back"

"Yes, Cougarstar," they answered in sync.

Instantly, Cougarstar seemed to grow unwary, for his gaze darted furiously to Pantherleap. The warrior turned to the exit of the den and Adderheart followed at an even pace. On his way out, he couldn't help but hear a snarky comment.

"Don't mess it up."

A small bout of high-pitched laughter followed and Adderheart swerved hurriedly to get away. He didn't want to be around Cougarstar ever again. The leader was a useless weight, one with negative feelings harbored within his incredibly dark and clouded soul. It seemed that not even Tinydust was capable of fully clearing the endless cobwebs and gloom that shrouded the leader.

Wasn't that what a mate was supposed to do?

Clear the gloom of a cat and accept them, even if that gloom did not leave? Cougarstar *had* that cat. Well, he had that cat who could accept him. Maybe nobody ever was meant to clear the ever-present darkness that blanketed Cougarstar. Maybe that was just who he was. A gloomy, shrouded, rude and irritable leader.

If it is, I don't like him.

"Who will we bring?" Pantherleap's voice snapped Adderheart to the present. The tom was sitting near the entrance, tail wrapped tightly around his paws. Adderheart quickly skirted toward him.

"Who do you want to bring?" Adderheart questioned in return. He

wanted Pantherleap to choose to see who he'd be most comfortable going with. If Pantherleap wasn't sure who to bring, then he'd just choose cats most likely to follow with a lie.

Pantherleap's eyes directed upward as if he was searching for an answer within the sky. "Russetpelt could likely be a mediator. He seems quiet enough," he commented. "Marigoldcry... could serve as the third 'senior' warrior. Who do you think we should bring?"

"Runningfoot, perhaps. Galewind as well. That gives us a patrol of..." Adderheart trailed off, attempting to count quickly as to ensure they'd have time to actually go soon. Hopefully, it'd be before sundown.

"Patrol of six," finished Pantherleap, giving a satisfied nod. "We'll gather them up at some point soon. Find who you can in the warrior's den," the warrior added, rising to his paws.

Adderheart stood, too, tail flickering back and forth as he gazed around the camp. It was somewhat empty, for he presumed that due to the timing, most cats would be out. It was a bit before midday, a prime time for hunting and training. Sometimes, he knew, the mentors would take breaks right when the sun was at its highest in the sky.

It was always so hot in greenleaf. The sun would beat down on them for nearly the whole day and it'd only grow warmer the next day. Of course, leaf-fall swept in with a light chill, though this leaf-fall was most certainly carrying more than a light chill. Anyone could note that easily, likely even a young kit without much of a concept of anything.

The camp was only occupied by a white-furred she-cat, one who held dapples upon her fur. Adderheart's dark gray gaze swept toward her, recognizing it as Willowdapple. Her belly was growing larger by the day, seeming as if it was ready to burst.

He knew that was not true, but it seemed to be a little bit unnatural in its rotundness. He wasn't about to go over to her, though, for he recalled how she'd shifted away from him. A light spark of sadness filled him though he turned, padding toward the warrior's den.

Peeking in, he was surprised to see Runningfoot and Galewind. Had Cougarstar not come in to yell at them?

Did he spend all morning in the den with Tinydust?

His pale pelt prickled uncomfortably and he recalled the she-cat's clear happiness with him. His ears twitched and flattened his ears, uneasy. The tom rolled his shoulders as if to clear the thought from his mind.

However, his shadow had obstructed the light trickling into the den, and both of the warriors had instantly sprung to their paws, heads hanging nervously.

"Pantherleap and I are leading a patrol to investigate some rogues scents at the border."

Both toms stood up straighter after realizing it wasn't Cougarstar. Galewind approached Adderheart and he shifted backward. Soon enough, Runningfoot's brown tabby fur emerged, brighter from the rays of light that slipped past Adderheart's pale pelt.

"Did Cougarstar allow you two, or is this something you're taking on your own?"

Adderheart's tail tip twitched. "Cougarstar allowed it," he answered, stepping backward and out of the den. "You should get something to eat. We've still got to wait for two members of the patrol."

Sunlight immediately brightened his vision and he blinked, though it wasn't as bright as he'd expected. Leaf-fall was notably taking a toll on the weather.

"Who would they be?" Galewind questioned, stretching a little as he stepped out.

"Russetpelt and Marigoldcry," he responded, and Runningfoot's head dipped, almost in approval.

"We'll be around," the tom commented, flicking his tail at Galewind for him to follow.

Turning away, Adderheart gazed around the camp once more. The pale-furred warrior spotted Pantherleap settled near the camp's entrance. Consequently, he was in the precise position where Adderheart had hidden them in the brambles and thorns of the camp wall. He couldn't keep a smile from rising upon his features, and Adderheart watched as the tom's gaze glimmered.

Padding over, he sat down next to Pantherleap. Wrapping his tail around his paws, the other tom nudged him the piece of prey. It was a grayish-brown vole, likely one that could pass as a mouse.

The mouse.

I forgot all about it.

chapter ten

Adderheart and Pantherleap quickly finished their vole, and consequently, it ended up with a bit of waiting.

Due to the fact Adderheart had said they'd be waiting for Russetpelt and Marigoldcry, the other members of the patrol seemed to get a bit irritated. Adderheart had spotted Galewind sitting near the fresh-kill pile, eyes narrowed lightly at the entrance as if he was impatiently waiting for the very moment Russetpelt or Marigoldcry entered camp.

Though of course, intently watching the camp's entrance would not make either of the warriors hurry up.

However, when Marigoldcry's thick pelt slipped behind the two toms, Galewind, who was watching with a sharp gaze, leaped up. His tail whipped at Runningfoot, who had settled beside him, and the two toms padded in sync toward Marigoldcry. Behind the white-furred she-cat came Russetpelt. Both of the warriors seemed in neutral spirits.

Pantherleap's head swiveled to the two newcomers and he stood up, flicking his tail. Adderheart followed in the other tom's pawsteps, glancing to Marigoldcry and Russetpelt. Neither held prey, and neither seemed to hold the scent of borders upon their pelts.

What were they doing? He couldn't help but feel curiosity at their absence, but he pushed it away. He had to ensure that they were actually going to find rogues at the border, and if he was distracted in the middle of the investigation...

He shook his head as he turned to the two warriors. "Pantherleap and I are leading a patrol to investigate the rogue scents at the border."

The confusion that had previously been shimmering in their gazes faded away and Russetpelt gave a nod. Marigoldcry's lips seemed to

purse in light irritation but the warrior turned, whisking her tail at the entrance.

"Lead the way," she offered, and Adderheart swept forward.

He cast a glance over his shoulder to see Pantherleap bringing up the back, followed by Russetpelt, then Marigoldcry, then Runningfoot, then Galewind. He was the closest to the pale-furred warrior and was going at a fairly fast past so Adderheart picked up speed.

Quickly heading around a tree and then a fallen log, the warrior's brain began to conjure up random ideas and thoughts that caused his ears to press tightly to his ears. Anxiety trickled through him.

If I lie about where we scented the rogues, would Pantherleap comment?

But if I tell the truth and nothing is there...

Cougarstar won't trust me ever again —!

All the way to the border, Adderheart's mind was clogged with the ever-present thoughts of what could happen. He could hear the constant pounding of the pawsteps of the warriors behind him, the light huffing of cats who couldn't keep up, the air rushing by him... nothing could interrupt the constant stream of thoughts trickling through his head.

He swerved around a tree, tail lashing as he sprung over a small patch of somewhat pointy pine needles.

If I keep going straight, then we'll end up somewhere close to where Pantherleap and I first scented rogues.

But if I turn left, we'll end up —

"Adderheart, go straight!" Pantherleap's sharp tone cut through the soft silence of the air. Adderheart jumped once more, though this time because he'd been startled.

The warrior, instead of questioning Pantherleap's spontaneous command, just followed it, picking up his pace as he continued to

race forward. A sense of something alike to calm filled him. Yet, it didn't calm him necessarily. Instead, it just allowed him to run, the feelings fading away. Now they were simply a dull ache in his mind, taking up space that he needed to keep on breathing in an even pattern.

He seemed to fall a bit out of touch, for when he approached the border, he skidded to a stop. Adderheart, late to realize that they were there, turned around, spotting Pantherleap in the back. His face was a blank slate of simply nothing. It was not emotionless nor cold. It was simply clean, plain, simple.

Adderheart's fur prickled as he glanced away, dark gray eyes drifting back toward the border. His ears twitched as he heard the rest of the group slow down behind him. Tail tip flickering, he approached the border tentatively.

"Pantherleap? You're coming over here to stand with me," he called over his shoulders, and the warrior trotted up to stand beside him. He cast a glance to the rest of the group, who just sort of milled around.

"Everyone else form behind a pyramid behind us," Pantherleap instructed, turning around. He issued orders like a true leader— his tail flicked sharply at each spot as he spoke to each cat. "Russetpelt, you go there, Marigoldcry, next to him. Galewind, take the back, Runningfoot... next to him, too."

Each cat shuffled into position and Pantherleap cast a simple look at Adderheart. His heart swelled instantly. Traces of respect littered the tawny cat's green gaze, though as he turned away, it blanked once more. Upon Adderheart's features rose a small smile as he stepped across the border. Pantherleap's actions mirrored his and he could hear the light shuffling of the paws of the rest of the group.

Adderheart tipped his muzzle into the air and to his surprise, he caught the scent of something somewhat sour. The air was tinged with something sharp, he soon found, as he continued to walk forward. The territory wasn't too different beyond the borders, with more and more trees. Of course, the ever-stretching pine needle ground didn't end either.

Pantherleap's fur rose beside him and Adderheart glanced to his side, spotting the other warrior's whiskers flickering. *Did he smell them, too?* He wondered absently, studying the warrior for a moment or two longer. Though, the voices of the other members in the group broke his focus.

"Smell that?" piped up Runningfoot.

"It's sort of sour," commented Galewind.

Marigoldcry offered, "Yeah, it smells strange..."

Adderheart bobbed his head in a nod, not wanting to speak very much due to the fact he felt as though his focus was scattered all over the place. It was like he was trying to focus on one thing, yet another drew his attention away and toward something else. It was something he felt as though he couldn't control.

Irritation sparked within him as he continued forward. Pantherleap, beside him, seemed to be on edge, with his fur puffed up and his ears flattened against his head. Did he think that they were going to find something out here?

And if they did, what would they do? How would they capture the cat?

Adderheart would have to find out when the time came, and that was sooner than he'd of hoped.

The pale-furred warrior continued to carefully pad on, though the scent seemed to grow stronger. His ears pressed to his head as he paused for a moment. His dark gray gaze swept the area, eyes narrowing a few moments after. It was as if he expected something to jump out from the bushes.

"Oh my *StarClan*!" Adderheart hissed, stumbling backward. His tail whipped in the face of the warriors behind him, heart dropping to his paws, and Pantherleap stood still, fur rising upon his spine.

In the bushes, a stocky tom lay. His dark russet pelt was ragged and dirty, paired with darker markings upon his shadowed fur. A light snore came from his muzzle every few moments, though it was not

a smooth one.

It seemed to be torn from his muzzle each time, breathy and jagged as the tom continued to slumber, yet he didn't appear sick. Perhaps just exhausted... He seemed oblivious to the patrol that'd stumbled upon him. He continued to sleep.

"What?" Marigoldcry asked, attempting to peek around them. Pantherleap whipped around and muttered something irritably to the she-cat. Adderheart could feel the air still with tension around him and he shifted uncomfortably. What were they going to do? Terrible claws of fear grasped his heart.

The tom in front of them seemed to stir within a few moments of them just standing there and Adderheart, a still stone of terror, didn't know what to do. *I didn't actually expect to find a rogue, even though they might've! I didn't even expect any scents to be here... How' are we meant to catch this tom?!*

Galewind swerved out of the order of the cats and he sprung onto the rogue, a horrible yowl escaping his jaws as he swiped a pair of claws over the russet tom's pelt. Instantly, the tom's eyes opened, revealing a dark blue gaze lit with panic.

Runningfoot leaped forward too, Marigoldcry rushing to their assistance. Pantherleap forced himself to lurch forward, as Adderheart stood in a tense position. Fear had locked iron chains around his legs, tying him tightly to the ground. His paws felt glued to the ground with the distress that clouded his actions. Rather, the lack of them.

"Get off!" commanded Pantherleap, tail whipping as he took charge.

Russetpelt, who'd stuck back, slunk back to corner the rogue tom. His fur was bristling as he stared down the three warriors who had attacked the tom. Runningfoot and Galewind stalked away, cornering the dark reddish-brown rogue.

"You're not meant to kill him!" Pantherleap snarled, stomping a paw as he approached the rogue. His tail whisked delicately around the tom's neck, curling tightly, and Adderheart flinched.

"Wh-who are you?" The rogue stammered, eyes darting around. His eyes held a blaze of fury, yet waves of fear swarmed off him. His fur spiked as Pantherleap pulled him close.

"Who are *you*?" challenged the warrior. Adderheart's features seemed to relax at the familiar brutality of the tom, yet he didn't like it. Forcefully, Adderheart lurched toward the warrior, a note of a mean fiery spark lighting his dark gray eyes. He wished it didn't have to be this way, but he knew he'd already messed up. Pantherleap knew exactly what he was doing...

"C-Carmin," stuttered the rogue, eyes widening. "I'm a r-r-rogue. Is this... y-your territory?"

"You know where you are," Pantherleap hissed, tone lowering. "I know you do."

The russet tom flinched. "Ok-okay fine, maybe I d-do know, but... but I don't have any information for you, if that's what you w-want from m-m-me..."

Pantherleap's green eyes narrowed at the rogue. "Are you sure?"

"I don't kn-know anything! And if I did, I-I... there's no way I'd t-tell you," Carmin hissed, trying to force a note of confidence into his tone. It didn't work, and his voice faltered.

Pantherleap rolled his eyes, tail releasing the tom. He fell to the ground, collapsing beneath his shaking legs. The tawny-furred warrior was a blank slate of emotion, simply mirroring the actions that the rest of the Clan would like to see. A spark of appreciation lit up Adderheart as he stalked forward. He could do this. He could jump in and be sharp too.

He could lead too. It was his patrol too. *I can do this.*

"Up," he ordered, tail flicking harshly. He swallowed heavily, shoving back a wave of emotion. He didn't need to show this cat kindness. This rogue was on his territory.

"I-I can't..." whispered Carmin, dark blue eyes terrified as he looked up. Moving his tail aside, the rogue revealed a deep gash on his

back leg. Adderheart's ear twitched and he forced his eyes not to round.

"Who did that?" Adderheart glanced over his shoulder at the cats gathered. Runningfoot stepped forward, dipping his head cordially, and suddenly a sharp chill swarmed within Adderheart.

It was as if someone had given him some sort of... confidence injection, like a cat from the clouds had delicately danced down and whispered sanguine words into his ear.

"You're to carry him back," asserted the warrior, tail flicking sharply once more at Runningfoot. "Pantherleap and I will clean this... up. Just wait, for now."

The pale-furred warrior gazed at Pantherleap and the warrior stared back at him, emotionless.

"So are we meant to move him?" Runningfoot asked, padding closer to Carmin, eyes narrowing.

"Yes," Pantherleap cut in. "Be careful with him. We're meant to bring him back, so don't kill him."

Carmin's breathing seemed to become a little more labored at this fact, but Runningfoot slipped the tom upon his shoulders. He managed to waddle a few fox-lengths away, yet the tom wasn't too strong. Adderheart turned away for a moment, gaze flashing toward Pantherleap. He needed to clean up the mess while still being able to see the rest of the patrol.

And, really, still being able to speak with Pantherleap.

At the moment that Adderheart turned, a deep and loud *thump* sounded, followed by a hiss and then a groan.

"What...?" Adderheart turned and the scene he saw made his heart drop.

Carmin was sprawled on the ground, eyes rolled back into his head, and his flanks were not moving. His head appeared to have been slammed on something accidentally, for there was an indentation in

the tom's head. Nearby lay a rock, sharp and edged.

Adderheart's mouth dropped open before he could stop it. The russet rogue's pelt and, mainly, his back leg was stained with dark crimson blood. The injury before was now trickling heavier and heavier. Why had Runningfoot allowed the tom to casually slip off his back and onto the rock?

A deadly cold chill ran down Adderheart's spine.

They wanted him to die anyway.

He couldn't believe it, yet for some strange reason, he wasn't surprised.

The group fell into an awkward sort of silence, with Runningfoot watching emotionlessly. His baby blue gaze was covered with a deadpan, almost detached blanket, covering anything that he may have felt for the now deceased tom, a similar one falling upon his features. His back was stained lightly with the crimson blood that soaked the rogue's pelt.

"Bury him."

Pantherleap's command ran through the soft air like an edged knife.

Marigoldcry swept over, her long fur seeming to cover up the world in front of Adderheart. Before he could count a few moments, she'd ripped chunks of the ground out, nudging the limp body of the tom into the hole she'd created.

It wasn't big enough, so she just shoved downward on his crumpled body.

The she-cat eventually finished up with patting the final patch of dirt rather harshly upon his bloodied pelt, as if that would help him stay dead. She licked a paw clean of blood and then delicately she ran it over her ear, settling down by his crude grave. The thick-furred she-cat leveled an equal stare with Pantherleap.

"Time to report to Cougarstar," said Galewind in a clipped tone. Nearby, Russetpelt shifted and studied the obscene burial site.

Clearly, the russet-pelted tom wasn't comfortable with chatting about the topic.

Simply, Pantherleap rose to his paws.

"Clean it up," directed the tom, being sure to keep his tone even. "Cougarstar will hear that we have not killed him, instead that he... was injured when we found him. Otherwise you—" he tossed a sharp glare at Runningfoot— "will be the one in trouble, and I don't think you want that."

Runningfoot gave a shaking of his head, though his gaze still was shimmering impassively, insincerity seemingly clouding the brown tabby's actions. He lifted a white paw and he, too, licked it and drew it over his ear.

Though, he and Galewind rose to their paws in sync and began to scrape away at the ground. The latter's claws unsheathed easily and began to easily tear away at the ground. However, Runningfoot shuffled off to the side and sectioned off bits and pieces of the nearby layer of pine needles.

Once he'd done that, the brown tabby slunk back and placed them in small patches around to cover the blood that wouldn't go away. Some sections of the crimson liquid seemed to have soaked far beneath the upper layer of the dirt and infected the ground beneath it.

So covering it up was the best method, it seemed.

"Done?" prompted Marigoldcry. Russetpelt stood behind the white-furred she-cat.

"Don't rush me," huffed Runningfoot, though without legitimate irritation in his tone. It was angrier, sharper, yet it didn't allow a lot of emotion through. Notes and undertones of fury slipped in and out as he spoke. "It'll be done in a bit."

And he was true; within a few more moments, it was finally finished. The clearing looked somewhat normal, and although it reeked of blood, as Adderheart trotted away, it wasn't very

noticeable. He could smell the border with its familiar scent of the cats of his Clan, ever-present. They wreathed around him, cradling him within warm and pleasant arms.

The rest of the patrol padded along. Instead of a soft, pleasant silence, a heavy and dark one settled upon the group, seemingly crushing their spirits to the ground. Adderheart swerved ahead, though Pantherleap took a spot next to him rather quickly, and Adderheart was glad. He couldn't lead by himself after that... incident.

Anxiety stirred in his belly as he continued to walk.

Though, it was slightly dulled by the fact that dusk was falling.

It allowed him to slip easily through the shadows, undetected by watching and intrusive gazes that he knew were not around, yet he couldn't shake the sense that they still existed.

chapter eleven

On delicate paws did Adderheart enter SageClan's camp. His tail with the two white stripes flickered lightly behind him as he trotted in, Pantherleap's pawsteps syncing with his own. Though, Pantherleap's stride was much more, well, confident and easy, whereas Adderheart's was quite the opposite.

A meeting with Cougarstar was most definitely not preferred, considering their last interaction, but it was something that couldn't be avoided, so he may as well own up to it. He had been the one to originally offer to speak, after all, and then they'd lead the patrol, found Carmin...

All because they'd spoken up in the first place.

I guess this is where it leads me.

Pantherleap slowed as Adderheart swerved ahead and toward the leader's den did he go, with his ears twitching all the way there. He could hear the somewhat dulled chatter within the den, soft yet powerful despite its tone. Marigoldcry skidded up beside him, head tipping in light curiosity.

"Should we come in, too?" Her tone was questioning.

"Yes," Adderheart replied, pausing at the front of the den in order to address the group. Runningfoot's edged gaze flickered over to the pale-furred tom.

"You should be able to do it on your own, I'd think," he commented pointedly.

"And you were there," Adderheart responded easily. Luckily, his moderate nerves did not cause him to lose his quick and intelligent replies. "We don't want Cougarstar to assume I'm lying, or that the patrol was a failure and that I'm making something up."

Runningfoot went silent though his muzzle wrinkled slightly.

After a momentary silence had fallen upon the group, Pantherleap called into the den, "Cougarstar?"

A broad and tawny shape moved within the leader's den. Shadows fell and shifted at the movement of the leader most clearly there, and a few moments passed in the quiet from before. It had returned to lay itself in a concealing blanket upon the patrol. Yet, a ray of light flitted by, landing in the den. The dusky sky still allowed scraps of light to spread upon the camp and enter dens.

It illuminated the thick-furred leader as he answered somewhat surly, "Yes? Come in. Has your patrol returned?"

Pantherleap stepped off to the side, tail whisking as if to indicate that Adderheart enter the den first. The brother of the leader offered him a simply shiny green gaze, yet in its depths, it sparked brightly at the other senior warrior. The pale-furred warrior offered an equally guarded yet shimmery gaze back to him.

"We have," Adderheart commented, padding in. The pale-furred warrior's ears flickered as he ducked slightly, edging off to the side in order to allow the rest of the patrol to filter in. First entered Marigoldcry, stride confident. Russetpelt sidestepped in, mild and pleasant among the next cat, who happened to be Runningfoot in a slinking motion. Galewind headed in, tail curled over his back.

Cougarstar's gaze seemed to steel over as it flicked up to Adderheart. "So? What'd you find?"

"Rogues," replied the warrior in a simple tone. Instantly, the leader sat up.

"How many?"

"One." The words dropped from his maw with ease.

"Describe it," commanded the leader. His tawny fur was sleek yet shiny as if it was glaring back at Adderheart.

"Carmin was a stocky, russet-furred tom with dark blue eyes,"

recalled Adderheart. "Likely around forty moons in age, give or take a few. His back leg, when we found him, was mangled and injured, and he appeared weak from blood loss. His fur was dirty. I believe he was either suffering from neglecting his wounds and health or something of the like."

"Was?" Cougarstar's expression sharpened.

"He died."

"What? How?"

Adderheart's tail tip twitched. The rest of the den was appearing more and more fidgety by the moment- not out of nerves, but because all of them knew that he was about to lie straight to his leader, more so than he had already done. The senior warrior could almost sense Runningfoot's baby blue gaze upon his pale fur as he opened his muzzle to speak.

"Blood loss, most likely," he acknowledged, allowing no emotion into his words. "We were looking at the area around him, and Runningfoot was questioning him. That's how we got his name, and despite our attempts to get him to spill information, he'd not say anything."

Pantherleap glanced to his brother and added, "The rogue was scared around us, too. It was clear that he knew he was in our territory yet he didn't make an effort to get out, though that could be attributed to his injuries."

"Where is his body?" Cougarstar demanded, rising to his paws with a quick movement. "Fetch Bearpatch and Palewhisker, and gather Fluffyflame, Antwhisper, Freckletuft, and Dustshade. Runningfoot, Galewind, dismissed."

"His body is likely gone by now," Adderheart commented, also rising to his paws. His heart was beginning to pound slowly. It, a drum, holding a light base beat, rising in the background of his thoughts, his mind, pulsing within his heart as he watched his leader turn toward the entrance-

"The rest of you, hurry up. If there's information around then we'd better get going," Cougarstar ordered, sweeping from the den's entrance.

Fox-dung.

Adderheart cast a glance at Pantherleap, who shot an equally covered yet frustrated gaze at the tom. He seemed to share Adderheart's every move. The tawny-furred senior warrior's tail swished as he offered to let the rest of the warriors leave the den. Marigoldcry practically pranced out.

"I'll take behind him," Pantherleap hissed in a low tone, already moving toward the entrance.

"Pantherleap, wait-!" started Adderheart, lurching after the warrior.

"We're doomed to get caught if we wait!" Pantherleap retorted, tail lashing. "Just- come on, Adderheart. We'll talk later. We have to go!"

Before Adderheart could plead his case any further, the leader's brother turned and swept from the den in a similar fashion to Cougarstar. He could see the similarities. Swallowing a small sigh, Adderheart followed.

While the cats had chattered within the leader's den, an ocean of a dark sky had soared through the air. Upon its feathered wings lay the nighttime and the shadows, too. They seemed to fall, whisking and twirling down to the ground until they fell and stuck to the area around camp like cobwebs. Strung lightly by the gloom of night, the shadows danced and twirled at small shafts of light from the moon.

What a perfect time to go explore.

Cougarstar whipped to face Adderheart and his green gaze was a blaze of flames in the dark of night.

"Get going. It's going to be impossible to tell if the rogues are actually there if we don't go right now."

"We still need the other warriors, and Palewhisker and Bearpatch," pointed out the pale-furred warrior. "You said that we'll need them to go."

"Marigoldcry," he ordered, turning to face the fluffy-furred she-cat. "Get them."

The she-cat nodded fervently and at a quick trot she set off toward the warrior's den. In moments, she re-emerged with Fluffyflame following behind. The rest of the senior warriors, especially Freckletuft, with her patterned pelt so easily slipping to the darkness, seemed to be camouflaged within night's somber arms.

Beside them, Adderheart heard a voice split the air.

"What's going on?"

Palewhisker.

Adderheart could not recall the last time he'd seen the grayish-tawny tom. His coat was shiny and sleek in the light of the moon and the stars up above, and his pale brown gaze shimmered with interest. His belly swung ever so slightly beneath him as if he had eaten an entire bird before arriving.

Most certainly it appeared he'd been lazy over the past few sunrises, and that was really no surprise to Adderheart. He had always been a little motionless compared to some of the other cats in the Clan. He sent patrols, of course, but the tom had always acted this way. He'd always been lazier than the others, always believed he deserved more than the others...

Cougarstar's leading style did nothing to disprove this theory. If anything, it simply supported it and showed the deputy that he could do near to whatever he wished to do. He rarely ever was caught in trouble. If he had been, well, the Clan most certainly did not know.

If only it worked similarly for me.

"Rogues," answered Pantherleap before his brother could reply, "suspected, anyway, at the border. One for sure. Now dead, though.

Formerly named Carmin. Russet pelt, stocky build. Injured leg when we arrived. Died of blood loss, most likely. He was weak and a nervous cat."

Palewhisker's features seemed to flash with surprise at the description of the deceased rogue, however, he simply turned away, a light nod forming. Behind him, Bearpatch approached, ears twitching as he caught the ends of the conversation. Cougarstar's tail lashed at his thin-furred son.

"Did you get that?"

The heir nodded.

"Best to get going, then," Palewhisker cut in, heading toward the entrance. He slipped out of the camp with ease, despite the fact he'd likely not left in a while.

"Lead," commanded Cougarstar, "Pantherleap, you lead the rest of the patrol. Marigoldcry, take the back. Adderheart, you can follow... follow me."

Regardless of the large tawny tom's pause, he was not unconfident in his decision. Adderheart's stomach twisted with worry as he padded to stand beside the leader. His ears gave a slight twitch as the leader swept his paw underneath Adderheart's leg. Stumbling, Adderheart found himself positioned behind the leader, just as he'd wanted. Swallowing a sigh, Adderheart lifted his leg tentatively.

It was fine, for only a small ache echoed within it.

Pantherleap had plunged into the forest ahead and the rest of the patrol had followed, leaving Adderheart and Cougarstar alone at the entrance of the camp. Adderheart's belly squeezed into a knot, his mind racing in circles as he wondered what to do. He was instructed to follow Cougarstar. His fur prickled uncomfortably. Why wasn't the leader going at all?

The tawny leader turned to Adderheart with a slow, sweet movement that could only be described as something alike to honey. The opening of his muzzle was flowing and soft yet did not

hold the usual deliciousness that accompanied the luscious golden substance.

"Be careful, Adderheart. There are many more dens to clean out."

The tawny tom sprung toward the entrance, immediately launching himself out and into the piney territory of SageClan. Adderheart stood still for half a moment, tail bushing, ears flattening, fur bristling, all as soon as the leader had gone, but he huffed loudly as if to expel the notion of that occurring and swiftly headed after him.

Cougarstar's pawsteps slammed against the ground, his broad features only moving every few moments. His strides were long and efficient, almost as if he was simply leaping to catch up, whereas Adderheart's were swift and somewhat short, and although his form was slim and lean he still found it hard to keep up with the leader's strides.

Eventually, he saw the pelts of the rest of the group fade into view. First was Marigoldcry. Her thick white pelt, accented with cream stripes, was bushed up in the wind that rushed by. Adderheart could see Palewhisker's fur up ahead, and Pantherleap's, too.

He recalled this path from earlier and although it would've been easy to catch up to Pantherleap, he knew he had to stay behind Cougarstar. He'd be doomed to... anything, really. Anything that Cougarstar wanted to do to him was something that the leader would most likely do, no matter the advice given to him by other cats.

Adderheart did not sigh, for he swallowed it and did not allow it to escape his jaws. If it did...

Up ahead, he noted that Pantherleap seemed to be slowing. Had the entire patrol of... *eleven*-?

"We've arrived!" The call from Palewhisker was sharp and breathless as he announced it to the rest of the patrol.

That was fast. I didn't even notice that we had left the territory.

Adderheart slipped beside his leader to swerve ahead but the tom's tail flashed out, curling lightly as if it threatened to flick tightly around his neck.

"Don't go ahead of me, I said." The warning was brusque as it slipped from Cougarstar's rough maw.

What? I'm meant to be leading, too. I was the one there!

A spark of outrage lit up Adderheart yet he quickly put it out with a swamping of his emotions. He couldn't show any of this. He'd be so much more doomed if he did. So, simply, the tom allowed a light nodding of his head to occur as he stuck behind the leader.

He caught a look from Marigoldcry - it was a frosty look, one with glaciers at its edges and cold, dark ice at its center. She wasn't jealous, rather just angry with him for what appeared to be no reason. Adderheart forced his ears to stay pricked as the leader ahead of him stepped forward. Obediently, Adderheart padded lightly after him.

"Pantherleap, tell me what happened."

As Adderheart padded quietly after, he observed the area once more, and all the memories of the deceased rogue flooded back. He could almost hear the tom's voice, shaking and scared as he spoke to the patrol.

Pantherleap lightly stepped out of the line of the remainder of the patrol and his tail flicked at the bushes. Patches of blood still were on the ground and in hindsight, Adderheart was grateful for it. It made the story more believable. At least, he supposed so.

"Adderheart and I discovered Carmin here," Pantherleap began, tail flicking at the bushes once more. "He was of a stocky build, with russet fur that was dirty and ragged. He appeared to have been sleeping when we'd arrived. Perhaps he'd passed out, but he was most certainly not awake. Not until Runningfoot began to question him."

Russetpelt's ear twitched.

"After that, he appeared most definitely injured. He was having issues with standing and so we carried him, however, he died from the blood loss before we could really get anywhere."

Cougarstar's tail pointed sharply at Fluffyflame and his deputy. "Explore nearby for more traces of rogues."

Palewhisker's head dipped as he glanced at Fluffyflame, an odd light glimmering within his gaze as he sprung into the bushes.

"Marigoldcry, Dustshade, Russetpelt, explore the area and understand what's around." The command was stinging as Cougarstar shot a look at Marigoldcry. It was tinged with something similar to pride, yet it was dulled by the expectation of what he wanted. The thick-furred senior warrior allowed her gaze to drift to the two other cats mentioned as they plunged into other nearby bushes.

"Antwhisper, Bearpatch, Freckletuft, you three are permitted to hunt," Cougarstar allowed, though Adderheart knew that it wasn't out of generosity. It was because he knew that there were rogues here and he was now hunting in their territory, taking food away from them in favor of allowing them to just have it.

The leader turned to Pantherleap and Adderheart, green gaze sparking. "And you two and I will go on a separate excursion to find some more actual rogues."

Adderheart's fur prickled yet he suppressed it. He couldn't mess this up now, not when they'd just been clearly sectioned off to go and... search for rogues.

Isn't that exactly what Palewhisker and Fluffyflame are doing?

A colder chill spread across Adderheart's body as he realized it had simply been a distraction. Cougarstar was going to work them into the ground to find these rogues. Did the leader even believe him and the story he'd made up? Perhaps just a little bit of truth would've been better.

But if I'd offered more truth, I'd be punished for Runningfoot's actions.

He reflected, tail tip twitching as he turned to the leader as if to allow him to lead. The tawny tom gave Adderheart a sharp look as he dashed off into the bushes.

Adderheart glanced at Pantherleap, whose green gaze shimmered carefully. Adderheart wanted to spill everything- well, not everything, but the entire situation being unfair to the other warrior. He knew he couldn't say anything, though, not after... not after the fact that Cougarstar had most definitely picked them specifically together.

Did he know why? No, not really. The pale-furred warrior, skimping after the leader, could only assume it was because they'd both been there originally. But, why not pick someone like Marigoldcry or Russetpelt over him? There wasn't much of a reason to pick him. Though, Pantherleap was a different story.

As of the past few days, the tom had assumed that not many cats enjoyed his company anymore, though he hoped it'd fade away soon. It already seemed to be, slowly, skimping away into the backgrounds of the memories of everyone that moved far too quickly.

News in the Clan spread fast and died fast, too. If something was relatively important for a few days, it was sure to die within the next quarter moon. And if it didn't, it was something that was bound to last for a while. Leaping over a small patch of plain ground, Adderheart glanced to his left. Pantherleap had lapsed into a pace that was practically the same as his own.

Allowing his dark gray gaze to flick forward, he spotted Cougarstar's pelt, still weaving around a few trees. It wasn't as though they were going in circles - it was definite that they were not - but it was also clear that the leader wasn't actually finding anything, and instead was just running endlessly as if he expected something to be discovered sometime soon.

Though, as his head swerved to the side, he realized that he'd just gotten... lost. Lost within his mind, caught up in the storm of thoughts, and they'd not traveled too far.

This kind of behavior is going to get me in trouble. Focus, Adderheart.

chapter twelve

"There's nothing here!"

Cougarstar's voice, angry and sharp, drifted toward Adderheart and Pantherleap.

The leader had ordered that they split off into different sections. Green gaze alight with fury, voice a knife splitting through the soft air of new leaf-fall, the leader had stalked off after leaving Adderheart and Pantherleap alone.

Yet of course, the two toms did not conversate. They almost seemed to know that Cougarstar likely hadn't gone far and was probably listening in on whatever they were saying. Instead, they obediently searched the territory with minimal words exchanged. Why had they split up, Adderheart didn't know, but he was finally glad to get the leader off his back.

Though, it obviously didn't last long. Cougarstar had been practically enraged at the fact that they weren't able to locate any rogues after searching. However, Adderheart noted that, as they were searching, Cougarstar wasn't really leading them to new places.

The leader was fairly well known as a very skilled tracker, so it was likely that his anger seemed to dull his skill to a lower level. It caused him to simply lead the warriors around in large ovals or circles, once or twice walking directly over a place they'd already been to.

But Cougarstar, blinded by his ferocity, hadn't noticed. Simply, the tawny-furred leader had wasted more and more time with every passing moment, allowing his desperation to heighten. It was incredibly clear that he'd wanted to find the rogues at that very moment, as if he expected them to stroll out any moment.

So the leader jumped through the bushes.

"There wasn't anything there," reported the tom in a brisk and tapered tone, tail lashing as he stared down Adderheart and Pantherleap. "Did either of you discover anything?"

Adderheart shook his head, and Pantherleap, clearly in favor of answering with words, offered a few:

"No, we didn't. There were no new scents and if anything, there was simply old prey scent around."

Cougarstar shook his head harshly, leaping past the two toms. Consequently, they'd been somewhat close, and so he caused Adderheart to stumble, nearly tripping upon his paws. Hurriedly, he pulled himself up and turned to where Cougarstar had sprung through the bushes.

Pantherleap turned to him for a half moment, eyes flashing as he mouthed '*Sorry*' at the other warrior.

Adderheart's tail whipped instantly, beginning to open his muzzle in a reply, but the tawny-furred tom had already launched himself after the leader. Leaving Adderheart to do the same, most likely, and so he did, but as he landed in the clearing next to it, he simply saw Pantherleap's tail disappearing into the bushes.

Huffing, the pale-furred warrior sprung faster, paws slamming against the ground with small thumps each time as he hurried to catch up. Cougarstar would be even angrier if he were late. Adderheart could almost imagine the tom's expression, tainted and morphed by rage.

So when he spotted the tom ahead, he swallowed a breath of relief. Lapsing his pawsteps and stride to Pantherleap, who now was beside him, he noted that they appeared to be going back. Not to camp, simply the place where they'd all split up.

As the leader seemed to pause ahead, Adderheart noted that Antwhisper, Bearpatch, and Freckletuft had returned, and with quite a bit of prey, too. It appeared to run more freely when it was away from the clutches of SageClan cats.

At Bearpatch's paws lay a small collection of mice. Three, to be exact, two of bigger size and one smaller than the others. Likely a family he'd managed to snag, Adderheart guessed as he approached, stepping through the bushes.

Freckletuft held a large bird in her jaws, one with dark feathers that appeared soft and in good condition. Well, disregarding the blood that now splattered its raven-colored surface. Beside her lay a frog, too, clamped underneath a heavy paw, its mouth spread open as if in an endless squeal.

Antwhisper had a mouse and a vole as well as a lizard situated nearby him, his reddish-brown tail swept lightly around them. The lean warrior's jaws were stained, though not very noticeably, with blood from all of the creatures.

Cougarstar's tail flicked in delight as his green gaze surveyed all pieces of prey. *That's... eight pieces of prey.* Adderheart realized, dark gray eyes sharpening as he stepped to stand a little out of Cougarstar's way. Standing directly behind the leader meant he couldn't see anything.

Palewhisker's voice cut through the delicate silence.

"There's really not much here, Cougarstar!"

The pale-furred tom charged through the bushes, springing out on the opposing side with Fluffyflame racing after him. The latter was breathing heavily, his thick and fluffy fur clearly weighing him down.

"There were a few smells," pointed out Fluffyflame, "but nothing that was extremely clear or fresh."

Cougarstar's tail thumped against the ground, irritation clearly bubbling within his gaze. Adderheart sat down at the edge of the clearing, wrapping his tail tightly around his paws. Pantherleap shifted to stand nearby to the pale-furred tom after a few moments had passed.

"Marigoldcry, Dustshade, Russetpelt- where are they?" Cougarstar

demanded, sharp green eyes sweeping around.

Fluffyflame's tail twitched and Palewhisker commented, "I'm not quite sure. I didn't scent them around, so I'd guess they'd gone off in a different direction and are arriving back soon."

Antwhisper noted, "We could always take our prey back. The patrol is rather large, and we don't need everyone here to simply travel back."

"No, that's... no," Cougarstar shook his head. "There's nothing wrong with waiting."

But there was something a little bit wrong with waiting.

The moon, which had plastered itself in the darkness of the sky, was now slowly inching down toward the horizon, pleased to be so close to resting for the day. Consequently, this also meant that the sun, wherever it was, allowed some rays of brightness to creep over the horizon, despite the fact that it did not yet show.

Adderheart felt as though he was bound to collapse from exhaustion any moment now. The sun was soon to creep over the horizon and peek delicately from behind the trees, its rays of pinkish peach light delightfully scaring away the gloom of night. He knew that he needed to sleep, and he knew he needed something to eat.

He wasn't going to be able to do that at camp, and he also knew that Pantherleap needed rest and prey, too.

StarClan, he was really trapped. He could stay out here and try and catch a wink of sleep before the tom noticed that he was gone. In turn, that risked being discovered by any rogues that happened to head by, since he doubted that there were simply no rogues around.

He could go back to camp, get something to eat, and pretend to be eating near the edge of the camp. However, he could simply be napping, only woken by the sounds of the cats milling around, and at those moments, he'd take a bite of the prey. Then, he'd allow himself to slip into slumber once more.

His grip around his paws loosened as he glanced over to

Pantherleap. His heart ached a little for the tawny tom. His eyes were dull with exhaustion and his fur wasn't as shiny as it usually was. He sat down rather heavily within a few moments of Adderheart focusing on him. His shoulders slumped a little.

They'd better come back soon. Maybe I can corner Pantherleap off to discuss some of the stuff that's been discovered. Or, rather, lack of stuff that's been discovered.

So, the group sat around, waiting for the remaining cats of the patrol to come back.

Cougarstar settled off to the side, though he did not sit - instead, the tom stood, ears pricked and green eyes sweeping the clearing as if he expected the group to simply break through the bushes at any moment.

Bearpatch, after being motioned over by his father, sat down next to the large tawny tom, Palewhisker following soon after. It seemed as though Cougarstar was uncomfortable in this territory, but everyone knew that he wasn't afraid. He wasn't really ever afraid, and that wasn't because he was arrogant.

It was simply because the tom's courage was presented in the wrong way. He *was* courageous, but he took it too far in many situations. Of course, that also meant that he was incredibly proud and confident in his decisions, most of which were... incorrect.

Then, through the bushes emerged a thick white pelt with creamy stripes. *Marigoldcry. They've arrived.*

Cougarstar stood up, tail whipping at the two new pelts that stepped through the bushes after Marigoldcry. One was fluffy and white with dark russet accents - Dustshade - and Russetpelt's shiny reddish-brown pelt followed after.

"Did you find anything?" he asked. The tom's green gaze glinted in the sun that seemed to be slowly shifting above the horizon, as now the moon was settling upon the line in the sky.

Marigoldcry, Dustshade, and Russetpelt all answered in the same

tone at the same time.

"No."

Cougarstar's gaze sparked for a moment but he turned around, tail lashing at Palewhisker. "Get some of the prey. Bearpatch won't be able to carry the smallest mouse without smushing it."

And neither will he.

Adderheart glanced momentarily at Freckletuft, and then his dark gaze swept to Pantherleap. He rose carefully. His bones creaked and he suddenly felt much older than he really was. He was only around sixty moons old, and he knew that he was bound to start feeling older soon, too. Pantherleap was sixty five moons, as far as he knew.

Cougarstar was eighty five moons old, and nobody knew the amount of lives that he had left. Well, besides his heir, and possibly the healers, too. Palewhisker, perhaps. It was one of the most closely guarded secrets that SageClan ever held.

It was like that with all leaders, though. No leader went around and shared when they were going to die, just like how leaders didn't go around sharing prophecies. However, SageClan most certainly differed in the fact that sometimes, the leaders would share prophecies with senior warriors.

If the heir, healers, deputy, and leader couldn't figure out what it meant, the prophecy was sometimes extended to senior warriors. Adderheart couldn't recall a time where he personally had been given a prophecy to assist in solving, but it was just something that Cougarstar did.

Sometimes.

And it wasn't like he was going to get it now.

Adderheart watched for a moment as Cougarstar surveyed the cats around, and then he sprung into the bushes, headed for the camp. The pale-furred warrior simply observed as the rest of the patrol launched into similar actions. He gave a half-hearted leap, legs

aching too much for another full leap.

The tom heard Pantherleap struggling similarly and he gave the tom a frustrated glance. He didn't like being behind. He didn't like being the cat who wasn't keeping up. He could tell that Pantherleap felt similarly, as frustration seemed to gleam from within the tawny tom.

However, it was soon that they arrived at the camp's entrance. Adderheart's pace slowed dramatically as he scented the familiar cats and smell that wreathed the camp. Lightly, he allowed his dark gray gaze to skimp up to the sky.

It was no longer darkish. Instead, the sky cradled the warmth of day within its paws, soft and delicate as it offered swirls of peach and magenta to the pale blue sky. Pale clouds skittered across its surface as if expecting it to snap at it, yet the sky was pleasant and warm with the coming of day.

The moon had far sunk below the horizon and in its place flew the sun. The ball of light rested carefully upon the horizon, a beaming grin spreading across its features as it surveyed the camp below.

Cougarstar whipped to face the group, pulling himself to a stop.

"Don't talk about this," he ordered. "And, Palewhisker, Bearpatch, Pantherleap, fetch-"

"Cougarstar!"

What-?

From the leader's den ran a small whitish-brown furred she-cat, who Adderheart immediately recognized as Tinydust. The she-cat practically wrapped around her mate, which was quite difficult considering the size difference between the two cats, and she purred, nuzzling his thick tawny fur.

"You're back!" she exclaimed, looking up to him with widened pale gold eyes.

"Indeed," the tom rumbled, and he cast a sharp look to his brother,

son, and deputy before leading the she-cat off. Consequently, that was right back to the leader's den, and instantly Adderheart guessed what was about to happen, especially considering that Palewhisker and Pantherleap had been called to get someone. Or some cats.

They're going to have one of those 'meetings'.

Adderheart's gaze flicked over to Pantherleap who had already began trotting miserably to the healer's den. The pale-furred warrior longed to speak to him, but knew that the rest of the patrol would certainly find it odd, and so he simply stayed quiet, watching as he stepped into the healer's den.

Beside him, Fluffyflame and Freckletuft simply turned around and bounded back out. To where, he didn't know, and he really didn't care. The two were likely off to discuss the apprentices. Fernfall was nowhere to be seen, though.

Pantherleap emerged from the healer's den with both dark-furred she-cats and they simultaneously padded toward the leader's den, where Palewhisker, Bearpatch, and Sootdawn had gathered.

One by one they filtered into the den, Pantherleap slipping in last.

I'd wanted to share something to eat with him, he thought, frustrated once more. Russetpelt and Dustshade shifted beside him yet they headed for the warrior's den, Marigoldcry and Antwhisper following similarly. However, the pale-furred senior warrior made a cut straight for the fresh-kill pile.

He sniffed the pile almost tentatively, not sure of what to choose.

Eventually, he settled upon a small, rather thin mouse. Its fur was an awful sort of grayish-sooty color. It appeared as though it had been sickly before its death or that it had been starving. Its little ribs poked out from its skinny form.

The pale-furred tom picked it up delicately, carefully carrying it toward the edge of camp that he seemed to consistently go back to. Adderheart knew it well by now, with the multitude of instances that had occurred right near it. It was unforgettable.

As he settled down and curled his tail around himself, he felt drowsiness overcome him in waves, similar to an ocean washing lightly upon the weathered shores of a beach. He laid his head on his paws, sniffling a little as he took a bite of the creature. It didn't taste bad, but it didn't taste normal.

Though, from the corner of his vision, he caught shapes moving about the leader's den. Absently, he let his dark gray gaze drift over to the entrance, and within it, he could see shadows flitting inside. A few hisses and snarls seemed to follow and instantly the warrior looked away.

If Cougarstar caught him looking, he'd be so doomed.

Solution?

Don't look at all.

But Adderheart knew that he would be simply too drawn in by the noises and hisses that gently floated from the den, and so he speculated instead.

Speculated as to what they could be arguing about, that was.

Likely the patrol, he realized. *Hopefully Pantherleap is doing okay. I know he'll want the truth to be out but he's also... really, really tired. I hope it goes okay.* The tom's tail flicked in concern for the other senior warrior. He knew that the tawny tom would certainly not allow any lies to escape Cougarstar's muzzle.

But would he be too tired to fight back? And if so, would anyone else say anything?

The healers weren't around. So would Pantherleap have ensured that they would know the truth, or...?

The pale-furred warrior's eyes sharpened and he quickly finished up his mouse. It wouldn't be any good of him to simply sit there and allow himself to speculate so uselessly. Perhaps he could do something a little better. Something that would actually help the Clan.

I'll check in with Willowdapple. Perhaps her kits are due soon.

Adderheart kicked the bones of the mouse away, and once more he skirted toward the pile. He didn't want anyone thinking that he was taking extra prey, which the tom was sure that he would never do, so he was quick to snatch up the first thing that came to his paws.

It happened to be a frog, and he recalled that she enjoyed them. His ears twitched as he quickly headed for the nursery, delicately ducking in. Instantly, he felt surrounded by warmth, for the sticks woven into the walls made it pleasantly heated within the den.

It made sense, after all. The kits deserved and needed the most heat out of any of the other cats. But Adderheart could guess that the dens that Bearpatch, Palewhisker, and Cougarstar had were specifically made for warmth too. His ears pricked as he spotted the she-cat stretched out between a few nests.

"Willowdapple?" he asked, shoving his way into the den. "Is everything okay? I brought you a frog."

"Yes, I'm fi-fine," she insisted, struggling to sit up. Her belly was swollen... far too swollen to be normal.

"Are you sure?" he questioned, stepping in and laying the frog down in front of her. She gritted her teeth, nodding firmly at his query. She pulled herself forward, taking a sharp bite of the frog.

"Thanks," she said through clenched jaws.

Adderheart simply sat down and curled his tail over his paws.

"If you need anything-"

She hissed in pain, but turned away from him.

chapter thirteen

Willowdapple shook her head sharply. "Don't. I'm fine."

Adderheart's tail tip twitched absently as he stood and padded a bit closer to her. "Are your kits due soon?" he asked, ears twitching as if threatening to flatten against his skull.

"Supposed to be," she answered, tone clipped.

The pale-furred warrior rose to his paws, unsure of what to do. Exhaustion tugged at his features, causing his shoulders to droop, but he knew that he couldn't leave the she-cat. If she was telling the truth, then, likely, something was to happen soon.

The she-cat's smooth white fur, accented by dark browny-ginger dapples, seemed to rise and puff up, her tail thumping against the ground as if to conceal herself. She notably gritted her teeth, squeezing her eyes shut as she looked away from the senior warrior.

"Should I go fetch...?" he started.

"No," she hissed, edged brown gaze flitting to him. It cut through the warrior like a knife through soft cloth, slicing and heavy against the placid cotton. "I'll be fine."

She's talking like she's about to have kits... The tom's expression tapered as he glanced to the entrance of the den. He could easily go to the leader's den and interrupt the entire conversation that was likely occurring within its heavily guarded walls.

If he interrupted, though, he risked a scolding. But he couldn't put his reputation over the health and safety of Willowdapple and her future kits, could he? Would that show the leader that he had changed, and wasn't that awful cat from before?

"Awful" cat.

He realized soon that the leader would not care, for he only cared

about himself, and he wouldn't notice he'd gone and assisted Willowdapple. What could he do? *No, that doesn't matter right now. Willowdapple and her litter do*. The tom's tail twitched absently once more as he gazed to the she-cat. *This is difficult.*

Her eyes were closed, yet they managed to open for a half moment, and within her gaze swam pain, sharp and bright. She was obviously hiding it from him, and not very well, clearly. The senior warrior rose decisively. He had to interrupt. He knew nothing about kits.

Would he ever know? Likely not, and now was most certainly not the time for him to learn. Other things had to be dealt with first. *Not first.* Other things had to be dealt with.

He pivoted upon his paw and skirted toward the entrance.

"H-hey!" cried out the she-cat, slamming a paw weakly down on the ground. "I said don't!"

Adderheart, approaching the entrance, glanced over his shoulder. A spark lit his dark gray gaze and a similar fire lit within her own. His ear twitched absently.

She needed help.

He was doing the right thing.

"I'm sorry, Willowdapple, but you need a healer."

"No!" she exclaimed, voice growing louder. "Don't y-you dare!" Her claws unsheathed and dug into the ground in front of her as she struggled to pull herself to a sitting position.

"I'm sorry," he responded again, dipping his head politely to her, but he slipped from the den and out into the clearing. He could hear the spilling of curses from the mild she-cat's maw, and he shivered, heading to the leader's den.

Adderheart took a deep breath.

Hisses and growls came from the entrance that he approached,

infected by irritation and anger. A few feminine tones slipped through the overwhelming deep and low tones of toms, mostly Cougarstar's ugly and furious growl. Only a few clear words were notable.

"...patrol! I *said*..."

"No! That isn't...!"

"...bad! It isn't... be...!"

"...no, it's... really... shouldn't be..."

Random snippets of a conversation most certainly didn't assist Adderheart in ensuring that he wouldn't be causing too much of an issue when he slipped in to notify them of the queen. Absently, the pale-furred tom wondered if the healers and perhaps the queens would leave and the rest would continue to argue.

Seemed as though that could be the case, he reflected within a few moments. Cougarstar would likely be opposed to viewing the she-cat's birthing and it was unlikely that Pantherleap would skimp along. Though, he might try and leave... and who knew what would happen then.

"Hello?" he started, poking his head in.

"I'll do it again, I swear to-" Cougarstar had risen to his paws and glowered above a cat, particularly one that Adderheart would recognize as Pantherleap. A terrible chill ran down his spine as the leader turned to him, green gaze a whirling inferno.

"Willowdapple-"

"*What* do you *want*?" The leader stalked forward, baring his teeth at Adderheart. His tail flicked up nearby his throat and the warrior suppressed another shiver.

"Willowdapple is having her kits," he answered, allowing his voice to be smoothed over. His gaze was even as it carefully edged up to Cougarstar's. The tawny leader let out a low hiss.

"Get," he instructed harshly, glaring at the two healers. "Return back when she's dealt with."

In the corner of the den, Pantherleap had scrambled back to his paws, pulling himself into a sitting position. His green eyes were covered with a mask, one that showed no emotion, and Adderheart quickly replicated it, letting his focus drift back to Cougarstar.

The pale-furred senior warrior ducked out of the den, practically bowing. His tail swept out and fanned against the ground, paws slow as he turned to pad back to the nursery. However, the two healers darted out of the den from behind him, each bounding toward their den.

Within moments, they emerged, carrying herbs and a few random items within their jaws. He padded lightly after them, but Coalbelly whipped around. Her fur was spiked and she whipped her tail sharply at him.

As if to indicate that he should not follow.

Turning around, the warrior simply slipped into the warrior's den. Once there, he miserably laid his head on his paws, feeling an uncomfortable prickle run along his spine. His dark gray gaze sparked with irritation, soon followed by general despair.

He seemed to be generally disliked by the Clan. Or at least, by the higher cats of the Clan, which was most certainly not what he wished to occur. He wanted to be liked, or at least felt neutral about. He didn't like being disliked because being disliked meant that one was bound to be isolated.

He didn't want to be isolated.

Adderheart liked being alone, but he didn't like being lonely.

Absently, the lean tom shuffled his position, shifting back into the shadows of the den. If anyone were to enter, he'd be doomed. Already more doomed.

But he didn't have to be doomed, did he?

If I work harder, will they notice?

Cougarstar wouldn't. But would the warriors around camp?

Likely, he reflected. That was how he originally came to be a senior warrior, right? Working hard, being intelligent... Couldn't he reprove that? Over and over again, until everyone knew he was in his rightful position.

But where could he start?

Patrols, hunting, training... Training would be difficult, though, for the time being it was unlikely he'd be invited to assist in Finchpaw's training. Bearpatch might even be more useful than him for the time being, and at this thought, he suppressed a snicker. The pale warrior comfortably nestled into the mossy nest beneath him.

He had always been skilled at hunting, so would it really be a surprise that he'd done more hunting now? If he tried to some things that were more... well, centered around fighting, would they notice? Or would it simply be another thing to brush off, as if to ignore his every movement?

It seemed that way. He could presume that Runningfoot was somewhat irritated with him, and he couldn't bare to think of Streamfang's thoughts of him. She was likely angry with him... still. And now Willowdapple was at least somewhat irritated with him.

Every interaction seems to be a mistake. Maybe it'd be in my interests to just stop talking and focus on working.

The thought crossed his mind and swiftly he smothered it, pressing it away and out of his mind. He knew that wouldn't work. His mother... had attempted it.

The she-cat, donned the name Tigerstripe for her lean, dark brown form, accented by white stripes, had always been the quieter type. She hadn't really ever left the den up until she was five moons old. Of course, he knew this was likely an exaggeration made up by her minimal friends.

But she'd not been bullied. She was simply a silent cat, one of small

and tiny words. It wasn't that she wanted to be noticed. Tigerstripe, as a kit and as an apprentice, had just been... quiet, and that was all there was to it.

However, Adderheart had heard the many rumors surrounding her. It had been spread around that she had somehow encountered a badger, a fox of some kind, some sort of horrific creature that had killed a close friend or family member of hers.

And for that reason did she throw herself into work. There was nothing else for her to turn to, for the friends she used to speak to decided to stop for reasons she'd not known. The she-cat had continued to work, almost comically hard, all day.

She had also passed the assessment, excelling in all parts. It made her a respected warrior of the Clan that many adored, despite the fact that none made an attempt to speak to her. However, one day, she broke free of the cycle of working constantly.

It had only been whisked away by a creamy tom, also adorned with white stripes. Particularly, this cat happened to be Dewfrost, his father. The well-respected within the Clan as well, and happened to catch her out by her own.

The two had cradled mutual respect for each other for as long as what seemed necessary. Dewfrost had taken an eye to her since apprenticeship, the she-cat following suit. Yet the latter had simply blocked off the feelings in favor of working.

Nobody truly knew what had occurred that night out on their own, but it had been assumed that Dewfrost and Tigerstripe had planned to have kits.

Planned.

Adderheart doubted it. From his kithood he recalled the she-cat being rather brash and sharp, yet not rude. Simply, she appeared to transform over time. She originally had been a bit, well, work-oriented, sticking around in the nursery for minimal amounts of time.

Since Adderheart didn't have siblings, he was alone in the nursery. His mother didn't stop by very often, only pausing to feed him.

Though, the she-cat had transformed to be more of a softer she-cat overtime. Did he know why? No. But had it happened anyway? Yes.

She had practically clung to the side of her mate ever since she'd started to warm up to him a bit as if she appeared to be sown to his side. Of course, she would stop by and coddle Adderheart, then Adderkit, for a bit, but it never seemed to last long.

His father had been more of a figure within his life that appeared concealed by shadows, or at least some sort of gloom. It wasn't really his fault for the tom had instantly appeared to shoot more for the Clan's likeness after he had been born.

Buried in his memories, he seemed to recall a day in which the tom had entered the nursery. Adderheart remembered Dewfrost's mannerisms enough to presume he'd been harsh in entering, a quick snapping of words escaping his muzzle.

It had likely been a jab at his mother, for he believed that at that time, the she-cat hadn't been too involved with him. As per usual, she'd stopped in earlier to give him a feeding, and Dewfrost had stopped in to say hello.

To say hello? Had he really done that?

He usually didn't. He usually just stopped in to offer prey or simply keep his relationship with his son up in order to appear somewhat relevant to his life in the eyes of the Clan. Most fathers let their kits to do whatever, really, and that wasn't too favorable in the eyes of most she-cats.

Perhaps that was why many liked Dewfrost.

But, as much as he wanted to remember it, Adderheart truly could not remember what he had said.

However, in retracing his memories, he bored himself, in a way, and the tom seemed to slip into a comfortable yet uneasy sleep, for it was clear he could wake up with any slight movement.

So for a while, he appeared to be fairly safe, slumbering away within the shadows. He was concealed from anyone who happened to just waltz in, but with a little inspection, his light-colored pelt could easily be discovered, no matter who the cat was.

The first cat to pad in delicately was Pantherleap and Adderheart woke up instantly. His head shot up, eyes blinking open rather quickly. He was still tired, that was for sure; exhaustion still settled within his bones and his eyes still drooped, but he felt somewhat more awake than before.

Pantherleap, on the other paw, looked as though he had been dragged through mud, placed upon the other side, swam an entire lake, drowned halfway through, and was forced to do it all over again, except carrying three sticks and a whole Clan upon his back.

Adderheart felt bad for the other tom. He knew that Pantherleap valued his reputation far more than he did, and it was clear that it was going to suffer soon enough. Adderheart didn't want that.

"Adderheart?" Pantherleap's voice was broken as he spoke.

"Pantherleap, yes? What is it?" Adderheart lifted his head, dark gray eyes flashing up to him.

"I... ah, did you just sleep?" His head tipped slightly to the side for a moment.

He nodded, and the other tom seemed to collapse next to him. His limbs were weak, clearly, shaking from the effort of constantly standing and sitting over the past few days. Soon enough, both tom's pelts were camouflaged within the shadows of the den. They fell perfectly over both figures of the warriors, concealing them from prying eyes.

Adderheart tentatively pressed against him in a comforting way. He didn't want the other tom to feel even more isolated from the rest of the Clan.

"Do you know how Willowdapple's litter is?" Adderheart asked softly. He wasn't about to alert the Clan of their presence.

Pantherleap's head shook slowly as he laid it on his paws. "No, I don't," he answered quietly. "Do you?"

Adderheart's tail tip twitched absently. "No, I don't. She was in a lot of pain before I left... I'm not sure if her kits were actually coming or not, but she seemed to be fairly close, anyway."

Pantherleap muttered something else, but it was hardly recognizable. His muzzle, pressed into his paws, made his voice muffled, somewhat twisted and curled so that nobody could understand it. Adderheart understood that the tom likely wanted to sleep, but he really didn't want to sleep the entire day.

It appeared to be around midday, Adderheart assumed. *Running off the small amount of sun, there's probably clouds.*

He wondered if Cougarstar was taking a nap, too. Or maybe he was bossing around the warriors within the camp. It was possible that he was even just relaxing with his mate. Perhaps Bearpatch was around and was chattering away with his mate.

Adderheart shivered absently, and Pantherleap murmured, "Cold?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. He paused and then admitted, "just... thinking." He laid his head on his paws too, tail curling tightly around his form.

"Me too," murmured Adderheart, position shifting.

"What about?" questioned Pantherleap, but not in an intruding way. It was more good-natured than anything.

Adderheart wasn't really up to sharing his thoughts, for he felt as though most of them were considerably personal. At least, the ones about his family earlier were. He presumed that the older warrior knew his parents, but perhaps not too well. His tail tip flicked absently.

"Not much... just about Willowdapple," he lied, emotions bubbling in his chest. "What about you?"

Pantherleap's eyes flashed and he shifted a little, a light frown

quirking across his features. "Cougarstar... and what you saw in the leader's den."

A jolting of shock seemed to travel down Adderheart's spine. He'd forgotten all about it, all about the position that the leader had been in, the glare in his eyes, the fury within his green gaze... How had he forgotten so quickly?

"He'd threatened to throw you out again, was that not it?" Adderheart's tone dropped to a much quieter one, which was certainly an issue for the other warrior, for it had already been quiet. Pantherleap's ears swiveled.

He nodded. "He was going to do it. I know he was."

"He shouldn't, he shouldn't. It isn't... " Adderheart trailed off, frustration sparking within him. It wasn't fair, he knew, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. An urge to protect the other tom filled him but he couldn't do anything. And that was what was the worst about it.

Pantherleap's tail flicked dismissively. "It's something... to get used to, is all."

That isn't fair! Adderheart lifted a paw sharply to his skull, trying to play it off as pain after realizing it came off a bit odd. The other tom glanced at him sideways.

"Sorry... just a bit achy," he lied - again. It felt wrong coming off his tongue, rough and immoral. He didn't like it, but he knew that Pantherleap wouldn't like him being against the leader's actions. There wasn't anything that they could do, after all.

And if he could tell the truth, would he? At the thought, a million emotions surged in his chest, strong and fierce. The warrior shoved them down and away. He didn't like them.

"Best you get to sleep, then," he murmured softly, laying his head back on his paws.

Adderheart's head dipped in a nod and almost as soon as he rested his features to be slack once more did he fall asleep, slipping away

to a pleasant world with the baseline as Pantherleap's fluid breathing.

chapter fourteen

Usually, Adderheart and Pantherleap would have been able to sleep for a while longer.

Perhaps they could've caught a few more hours, up until the later hours of night, so it was simply passed as a dawn patrol when they went out again together.

But not everything went to plan.

A thick white pelt pushed into the warrior's den, light spilling upon her fur from outside. Unfortunately, it was Streamfang. Unfortunately only for Adderheart, really, for Pantherleap held no issues with her. It was just about sunset, with the sun delicately inching lower and lower into the darkening sky.

"Adderheart?" Streamfang's voice broke him from his slumber.

The tom scrambled upward, accidentally kicking Pantherleap in his foreleg. Instantly, his mind whipped to life, thinking of ideas as to why he had just been laying in the shadows. In the mess of thoughts, he hoped that she'd not seen Pantherleap. That would be harder to explain.

Streamfang is observant, I know that, so if I get out of the den then she'll be suspicious of why I was inside of here in the first place. But if I stay then Pantherleap risks being caught. She'll know that I was with him. Then what will she do?

Milkfrost and Vixenfeather's memory bobbed within his mind and a flame of terror sparked within him.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, gaze sharpening.

"Sleeping. Not anymore," he commented, walking away with a large sweep of his tail. *If I draw her away...*

"Why were you sleeping?" She pressed, tail tip flicking as her dark

amber gaze trailed him.

"I was tired...?" He tipped his head, for Adderheart had padded a little toward his nest.

Her eyes narrowed. "This early?"

He rolled his eyes, knowing that he couldn't tell the she-cat of their many excursions over the past day or so, and besides, it wasn't like she would understand. Now, he couldn't challenge her to speak to Cougarstar, for it was guaranteed he'd be furious if he'd heard of him and Pantherleap, or just him, sleeping at unreasonable times...

So then what was he meant to do?

Frustration surged within him. Why was she being so unreasonable? If she hadn't of been so rude in the first place then he wouldn't be so stuck...

"Yes, just..." His ears pricked suddenly. "Willowdapple, okay? I was worried about Willowdapple."

Streamfang scoffed. "Yeah, and her kits aren't due soon, so—"

"No, I think she had them... them earlier. Earlier today," Adderheart interrupted, head shaking a little bit. "I was worried about her. She was... in a lot of pain. And I didn't want to be awake... for her kitting. I wasn't allowed to be around for it, the healers kicked me out after I had brought her something to eat."

Her muzzle quirked absently, as if she were to say something, but decided against it.

"So? What?" Adderheart prompted, nervousness smoldering within his creamy figure. He was hyper aware of the light and soft breathing of Pantherleap. It seemed to fill the den with a pleasant lull.

"You're the father, then?" She turned, turning a hostile gaze on him. "Why didn't you say anything? How come you're actually incompetent to the point of not insinuating it even a little bit? She's been harrassed for her decision about not telling and here you are,

letting it all happen. What, did you have a fight? I knew it. I knew it! I knew you had to be the father, or maybe it had to have been Pantherleap—"

He wanted to vomit.

"*What?!* No! I'm not the father to those kits! She's just a nice cat. You should know that, if you're her friend!" Adderheart's tail lashed as he whipped to face the she-cat, dark gray gaze sparking with outrage. "How dare you assume that I can't be concerned about the Clan's only queen, and not only that, but the only she-cat who is likely going to have kits in a while—"

Streamfang stomped a paw, tail whipping harshly in the air behind him. "You're such a liar! I just— Adderheart, you're the father to those kits. Don't lie to me."

The she-cat had approached him in a rather dramatic fashion, amber eyes an inferno of fury as she stared him down. She'd even unsheathed her claws and slowly she lifted a paw, as if to threaten to bring it down upon him. Blood roared within Adderheart's ears. It seemed to block out everything else that was happening in the den.

Memories of the two elders once more stirred within his mind, and he was quick to push them down. This was a mirror of that moment, except that it wasn't two elders and a leader... instead with two warriors. And the one that was younger was bothering the older one.

And nobody loved each other.

The she-cat cornered him to the wall, pressing a claw down on his paw, and he flinched, eyes sparking with pain. Her other paw lifted delicately to his throat, ensuring that it didn't shake with careful precision.

"Tell me."

However, in the momentary pause that occurred, a sharp, commanding tone filled the den.

"Mind explaining what's going on, Streamfang?"

Pantherleap?

A large tawny pelt barrelled mercilessly into the she-cat, and within moments, her thick white pelt was pinned beneath Pantherleap's broad-shouldered stature. His movements were forceful and sharp as he stood above the she-cat. However, he didn't seem angry, simply confused. At least, Adderheart couldn't see anger in his gaze. Perhaps he was hiding it extremely well...

How did he get in here?

"He's the father... to Willowdapple's litter!" The she-cat's tone was accusatory. It appeared to have passed the point of anger, ranging to fury. "He didn't tell anyone!" Her thick white pelt was puffed up, bristling furiously as if to expel some of the rage that she felt curdling within her being.

"No, he's not," responded Pantherleap and a strange spark lit in Adderheart's chest. "He was in good standings while she originally was discovered as pregnant, so why would it need to be kept a secret?"

She stopped, and then she spluttered, "I... well, maybe he was just uncomfortable with the idea that he was going to be a father or something! I know he is! And if he's not, *you* are!"

Pantherleap dropped down to be practically laying upon the she-cat and she hissed furiously at him, muzzle and lips drawing back in the beginnings of a nasty snarl.

"Adderheart is not the father, and nor am I."

Pantherleap's voice was deathly low, green gaze ablaze. It was a shiny, sharp, tawny knife cutting and slicing mercilessly through the soft, thick, white fabrics of Streamfang's idiotic ideas.

"If you speak of this, then I will be sure to speak of your little outburst."

"Nobody will care," she hissed, "Adderheart is nothing to

Cougarstar."

"And neither are you to me," he answered simply, "but I can most certainly portray it against you. And Cougarstar will not care to listen to your side of the story. I'm sure I'd know him better than you." The tom stood up, casting a glare at Adderheart. "I would've hoped this could go without saying, but, don't speak of this. Now," he continued, looking to Streamfang. "Out."

The she-cat rose, straightening her shoulders, and she sent a heavy and furious glare in Adderheart's direction, who stood unflinching. He didn't allow his gaze to be rude or sharp. Instead, the warrior resolved it to be simple, basic, usual. Nothing out of the ordinary. It couldn't be rude. Otherwise, she'd hate him more for no reason.

She huffed and stalked out of the den.

Immediately, Pantherleap swerved to Adderheart, lifting a paw to poke a bit at his neck, parting the fur upon him. The pale-furred senior warrior jumped a bit, surprised by the touch, though he allowed it to happen, the tips of his ears warming.

He was concerned about me.

"Did she get you, or?" The warrior glanced upward, head tipping.

"No, no... she didn't get me. How did you get out of the den without us noticing?" Adderheart questioned, shaking the other tom off. He was fine, after all, just... frightened. A little. Not really.

"It's easy to escape when nobody is paying attention," Pantherleap commented, a light smile quirking the edges of his muzzle. He seemed to pause, ears twitching. "But is she right? Are you the father?"

"No. No. No, never, I... no, I'm not." Adderheart nodded firmly, dark gray gaze sparking a little. "One of the least backed up ideas in the world. There's no reason for me not to be worried over Willowdapple and her litter, considering I was the first around for her to start being in pain."

"Cats don't care in this Clan, Adderheart," chided the tom. "Most

wouldn't care too much about Willowdapple or her litter, so it painted you in the light of a father's concern."

His muzzle twisted into a frown. "That's not fair. And why would I clearly tell her that if I wanted the whole thing to be a secret... Are we not allowed to feel concern for others?"

Pantherleap simply blinked, whiskers twitching indifferently. "Her opinions were most certainly not back up."

"So then why didn't she see that?" He asked.

"She's not the smartest, apparently. Just goes off assumptions, I suppose," he mewed with a light shrug.

Adderheart's muzzle deepened further, eyes sparking. "That's not fair. To me. Or to anyone."

"SageClan is not fair. I thought you knew that by now."

"I do," insisted Adderheart. "I do, I do. But some of the things that some cats within this Clan deem fair aren't."

Pantherleap's shoulders bobbed in another shrug. "Nothing we can do about that."

"Not with that attitude!" Adderheart responded, frustrated. How come he didn't want to do anything?

Pantherleap turned to the warrior, eyes sharpening. "So what are you suggesting we do? Take over the Clan? Fix the rules? How?"

Adderheart fell silent. Frustration surged further within him like a wave, foam-tipped edges contorting to reddish-pink fury. How come there was no solution for this clear issue and how come Pantherleap seemed resolved to living within this world?

"So?" Pantherleap prompted.

Adderheart turned away, tail lashing.

"There isn't anything we can do, Adderheart." His voice seemed to

soften a little and he padded up behind the tom, shuffling to stand in front of him. Consequently, this squeezed the tawny tom between the wall of the den and Adderheart, which looked uncomfortable.

Adderheart's muzzle, which had momentarily shifted to a neutral line, morphed to a light frown, deepening quickly to be a rather sharp and low irritated expression. His eyes sparked and he looked away, tail flicking in somewhat of a dismissive manner.

"Never mind, Pantherleap. Never mind." He shook his head sharply, padding back toward his nest. Though, he stopped himself and padded back out of the den. He looked over his shoulder and spotted Pantherleap just... standing there.

The tawny tom exited the den with a harsh push past Adderheart and exited camp swiftly.

Adderheart simply trotted rather swiftly toward the edge of the clearing. Considering that it had been sunset earlier, it was reasonable to him that he did not see a sun within the sky. Instead, a blanket of darkness replaced it, and it was insufferably heavy upon the early leaf-fall sky. A chilly wind skipped and twirled around the camp.

There wasn't any sort of warmth accompanying the breeze. Instead, the sharp and angry words of an early leaf-bare complimented the snapping tone of an on-time leaf-fall. It seemed to dance throughout the clearing, offering a few words of revolution to the grasses and thistles all twined together within the camp's wall.

The pale tom seemed to curl up tighter against the wall. It wasn't usual that any warrior would be awake at this time, and with a little sniffle, he realized he seemed to end up in this sort of place a lot.

With nobody to speak to, nobody to chat with, nothing to eat, for there was no way he was about to pad carefully over to the fresh-kill pile after supposedly being in the den all day. He hoped that Streamfang had simply left the camp to do some hunting.

It would not be in his interests to see her again. For a while...

Absently a thought of Willowdapple crossed his mind. It was fleeting, like the rest of the thoughts that just so happened to enter his head. He briefly contemplated speaking or greeting her, as from what he could tell, her birthing appeared to be over. He did not see either of the healers around the clearing.

Obviously... because they were likely sleeping. At least, he assumed that Coalbelly was sleeping. Maybe Twilightcloud had stuck around a moment or two longer to ensure that Willowdapple had slept well, or maybe she had even slept with her.

Doubtful.

Otherwise, they might think she's the father.

He muffled a snicker and he laid his head on his paws, blinking a pair of dark gray eyes that he quickly covered. His tail flicked sharply around his form since it had drifted absently when he had gotten lost within his thoughts.

Soon enough, he'd submerged in them again.

Is Pantherleap really willing to just lay down and do nothing to fight against this Clan?

The warrior's words echoed back to him. It seemed like it. But in reality, the tom was right. What could they do? Try and stage an uprising within SageClan's ranks? Who would actually listen to it?

He could always try and convert some of the most strictly-loyal cats... because if he got through to them, then he could get through to all their friends, and it would, unfortunately, be a game of spider-web by then.

Spider-web was a game that kits adored playing. It was likely one of their very favorite games, one of the hidden gems among the tons and tons of games played. He recalled playing it once, yet the memories of it were mostly foggy.

In order to play correctly, there had to be a set of five or more kits, so sometimes apprentices had to join in. It was unlikely that the game was ever played within the camp. Instead, queens ushered

their kits inside in order to hide the game from the brash warriors and leader of the Clan.

A queen or an older apprentice was chosen to be the overseer of the game. This overseer had to think of a special sentence, or a set of words, that the kits knew very well. Sometimes, it would be something like *"I see the warriors are back from patrol!"* yet other times it ended up being *"Your sister shredded the mossball and ruined Mother's day!"* and those times, everyone would rear back from laughing too hard because of the trueness of the events.

Regardless of the sentence chosen, this overseer would first share the sentence or words to a specific kit, usually one that the overseer liked more than the others. Perhaps this created a sense of friendship between the two, but it didn't matter, for now, the game began.

The first kit who had been told the sentence had to say the first two words with their eyes closed, and from there the other kits had to guess what the next word was. Once someone guessed it, the first kit had to guess who that kit was, and whoever they guessed now had to pose as the first kit... but without knowing what the actual sentence was. Now, after this point, a queen usually stepped in to stop everyone from arguing.

Since the kits were so intent on figuring out what it was, the game was eventually altered slightly. Originally, the cycle was meant to continue until it was guessed. However, the kits, ever rowdy, claimed that it should instead be that each time an incorrect guess was said, a word of the actual sentence must've been hinted to, but only to the kits who had guessed correctly.

From there, it was essentially a guessing game. The original kit knew the true intent or meaning of what was said, and the kits following them knew little pieces and bits of it.

That would be a near replica of what would occur with an uprising, he knew.

Well, except that there was no overseer, and that there was a high probability that someone would end up spilling it to Cougarstar.

And from there, everyone within the Clan was most certainly doomed to all sorts of terrors.

Adderheart's tail thumped with frustration against the ground. A shadow crossed his vision and he flinched, shifting back into the thorns and thistles of the camp's wall. However, nothing appeared. All that was around were the shadows and the gloom of a dark and chilly night.

And of course, the careful moon rose into the sky, shiny and bright within the gloom of an early leaf-fall night. He was used to it by now, for he appeared to be the last one up again. The moon was smiling down upon him, polite and serious.

However, tiredness, though dull, seemed to prickle through his form. He knew he had been asleep for a little bit earlier, yet the tom presumed that nobody would have to know about that.

Absently, he wondered where Pantherleap was, and surprisingly, a spark of irritation bubbled within him.

He's not doing anything to fight against the unfairness.

It still bothered him, at least a little bit, that the other tom was just going to... accept it. Accept that SageClan was just going to be this way, with idiotic ideas flowing freely from their stupid muzzles with no thought behind it. And how come he'd barely shown a scrap of feeling about the entire thing with Streamfang?

The light-furred warrior rose to his paws, and with careful movements, slipped toward the warrior's den. Irritation still bubbled within him but he pushed it down, wanting it to go away. Adderheart entered the den, critically moving as to not alert anyone of his presence.

He settled into his nest, and a cold silence surrounded him. The rest of the cats in the den slept soundly, ears flicking and paws twitching as if they had all been submerged within a dream.

Eventually, he laid his head upon his paws and settled down closer to the ground. Soon after, he slipped into a delicate slumber, tail

pulling tightly around him as he fell asleep.

chapter fifteen

Waking up the morning after was like some sort of muddy dream.

Adderheart rose to his paws rather slowly, limbs dragged down by exhaustion that seemed ever present at this point. His ears flicked and twitched as he dragged his dark gray eyes around the den as if to survey everything around him. Everyone was still asleep. Well, most cats were.

Light snores filled his senses and the faint breathing of everyone within the warrior's den seemed to combine together to create some sort of pleasant and familiar melody, a melody that all cats knew and had ingrained into their memories. Adderheart seemed to glance at his paws, unsure of how to get out.

A few tails and paws were strewn in the way of his usual path of exit, and so the tom bunched up his hindlegs and took a large leap forward, limbs stretching out in order to land safely. Luckily, he managed to get onto the other side with a swift motion, and following that the warrior left the den.

Now, outside lay another familiar melody. Yet this one was not as soft or pleasant as the one chiming politely within the warrior's den. This melody, created by the dawn breeze of a leaf-fall morning, was sharp and biting.

The chilly wind skimped and whisked by, twirling all sorts of random specks of dust or dirt along with it. The sun glimmered brightly upon the horizon, spreading a soft and pleasant light onto the camp. Adderheart liked it all. It seemed to be the perfect morning.

A haze of brightness seemed to cloud it, though. It was as if someone had accidentally spilled a little bit too much sunlight onto the camp and now had to clean it all up, but had forgotten or done the job wrong, and now everything was slipped into a sort of strange haziness that only a few cats could see.

Adderheart shook his head as if to clear the thoughts from his head, reprimanding himself sharply for being so spacey in the morning. He had to be focused, clean-cut, and overall, in top shape in the mornings. He glanced upward toward the sky, noting the moon slipping underneath the the horizon.

A few peachy shades began to take more of a prominence within the sky after a few moments had passed, and the darker tones of night faded away into a pale blue that many attributed to leaf-bare. However, of course, it was not leaf-bare just yet.

The warrior padded over to the fresh-kill pile and he inspected it. The few things in it were stale, a day or so old. It was easy to tell, really, for each prey's eyes held a darkened gleam, as if death had taken a far greater toll than usual on it.

After a few moments of deciding what to pick, the warrior selected a skinny frog, presuming it wouldn't be too bad of a choice. However, as soon as he picked it out and padded to a different spot in the clearing, Willowdapple popped into his mind.

I'll check on her in a few moments.

He reassured himself that the kitting had likely gone just fine, as most kittings did under the excelling healing and assisting skills of both healers. No matter their personalities, SageClan healers only excelled in their duties. It only seemed to get better as time went on.

One would think that there would be more elders, but many cats just clung to warriorhood for as long as they possibly could. It was funny, really, for some cats who really should've been an elder many moons ago just simply tried to do the things that younger cats did. It wasn't funny to them, of course. They simply wanted to help their Clan.

Taking a bite of his prey, the tom settled firmer against the ground as if attempting to solidify his place in the world. The pale-furred warrior seemed to finish his meal rather quickly and he rose to his paw, burying the bones after a few moments had passed.

The taste of the frog hadn't been bad or disgusting by any means, despite the fact its slimy figure had been tinged with staleness. His ears twitched and Adderheart licked his jaws, shaking his head as he glanced absently to the nursery.

Shuffling his paws, he slipped toward the den, ears pulling tightly to his skull. Quickly, he cast a look at the rest of the clearing, observing and searching to see if anyone else was around. Nobody was awake. Everyone was asleep. At least, it seemed that way. The warrior entered the den.

It smelled strange. It was sort of like blood, with that strange metallic tang that seemed to taint the area around, but it also was soft, pleasant, like the milk of a nursing queen. His dark gray eyes searched the den and he spotted Willowdapple, alive, and a spark of relief flickered within his eyes.

She was asleep.

Way to make it hard for me. He flicked his tail, a little frustrated, but the she-cat woke up immediately. It appeared to him that she had caught the sound of his tail flicking through the air, or his pawsteps had given it all away.

Her head jerked upward, tail curling fiercely over her belly as she looked up and over to Adderheart. At noticing who it was, she snarled furiously at him, tail thumping against the ground as if in silent rage. What had he done?

"What do you want?" She demanded, voice low.

"I just wanted to see how your kits are doing," he admitted, inching a bit closer to the she-cat. His movements were nothing short of tentative, ears flickering.

She seemed to take a deep breath as if to compose herself, like being around him was difficult or so infuriating that she couldn't keep her normal cool. The pale-furred warrior shifted on his paws as he waited for an answer or some sort of reply, and the she-cat let her paw curl sharply around where he presumed her kits to be.

He could not see the little bundles of fur, or perhaps they would be better described as flesh and bones at this point. He had never seen kits that were a day old, for his parents had no other litters after or before him, and there had never been a time where Adderheart, when younger, had wished to enter the nursery in order to look at little kits.

He'd only really ever seen them around camp, eyes bright, movements swift as they bounced from paw to paw, chucking mossballs at each other or whispering soft and delicate words. Spreading webs with their phrases, spreading cheer among the queens with their antics, causing other onlookers to be somewhat brightened by their little games... it was all too common for kits.

But they had to go through the first stage of life, and that was surviving the first couple sunrises or so.

"They all died," she said flatly. "Except two."

"What? How?" He demanded, concern filling his eyes as he stepped forward, but the she-cat thrust out a paw and tripped him. The warrior's paw collapsed and soon he fell to the ground with a hiss, but he scrambled to his paws, shaking out his pelt.

"No matter," she dismissed it swiftly, lightly brushing back her tail. "These two are the only ones left." Her eyes brimmed with emotion as she licked them both gently, rasping her tongue over both of their bodies.

Both already had some fur upon their tiny bodies. One had a gingery-brown pelt, with what seemed to be tabby stripes, the other wearing pale brown fur, and this one seemed to have white patches.

Adderheart's heart swelled. They were so small, so helpless and he felt an urge to protect them, especially considering that they had siblings, dead siblings, that they would never know of or about. And neither would their father, whoever that was. The warrior sat down, and the she-cat snarled.

"Don't sit down, you're not staying."

He rose to his paws, not wanting to irritate the she-cat further. "What are their names?"

"Stagkit and Featherkit." The words dropped from her muzzle like glass. Seemingly, they cut through the soft carpet of the air around them, but it wasn't soft any longer. Now it was tainted by glass, shiny and shattering within Adderheart's mind upon impact.

Vixenfeather.

"Originally, a litter of four..." she trailed off. "A litter of four. The others were named Whitekit and Snowkit."

Milkfrost.

His eyes seemed to sharpen a little bit, but he would not expose it for he knew that was the intent. He didn't need any sort of confirmation. It was clear. Was there a reason she was telling him? Was it a secret message to him, saying she wished for him to do something about the idiocy within the Clan? Had she been close with either of them?

He couldn't recall, couldn't remember. His mind was too full of random thoughts, too clogged of ideas and theories that were too big for his mind to handle. His ears felt like they were to blow off his head within moments, tail similarly, except it was to fall off due to the sharp flickers that seemed to control it.

"Is that all?" The she-cat asked, seeming to return to the shielded version of herself from before. She wrapped her tail tightly around the two kit's forms once more, and her eyes sharpened nervously. *Did she figure out that I know?*

He nodded.

"Now get out." Her voice was cold and he watched as she shifted backward, lips drawing backward. She seemed to pause, as if she knew something, and then hissed quietly, "I know you know. Don't."

He dipped his head quickly and left the den, and as soon as he left, he couldn't seem to forget her words.

As he walked across the camp he was unable to forget the way she spat the words from her muzzle. The way that they dripped mercilessly from her lips, tinged with anger and fury, yet injected with venom at the same time. The way her eyes shone coldly, staring him down as if daring him to say anything in reply.

Adderheart shook his head fiercely, glancing at the camp's entrance. What he should he do? The tom's gaze flitted to the sky and seemed to notice and observe the fact that it was still sunrise, or at least it could be considered as such. What was he meant to do now?

Hunt?

Without really considering it, the pale-furred warrior darted toward the camp's entrance and left.

Instantly, a weight was pulled off his chest. It was as if an entire Clan of cats had been settled upon his slim form and had been shoved off as soon as he left. His pelt felt long and luxurious, sleek and shiny all along his figure. His limbs felt light and airy, like he could float away.

...like he could lift into the air at any moment, and as soon as he did so, he could fly, with wings he could sprout easily, long and flowy, feathered with pale-colored bits of fluff, alike to fur but different...

He could be a dove within the air, fluttering upward before breaking into a clean and easy soar across the pale leaf-fall sky. He could flap his wings every few moments and still not fall, still not fall because he was free and away from the camp. The camp where everything seemed to go wrong, where everything seemed to get away from what the world was meant to be.

He could fly as long and as easily as he wanted to, away to wherever he wished to go in that moment. And if he changed where he wanted to go, he could do so easily with a quick swerve of his slim, airy body. If he were to run into issues, he just could fly above them. He could fly above and around everything.

A small smile rose upon his features and within a few moments, the

tom was charging into the territory.

It didn't matter where he was going, for the wind that rushed by his pelt told him it was going to be okay. It whispered and muttered soft, comforting bits of speech to the stressed tom. Everything seemed to be piling up, sharply settling atop the previous edged object or item, stacked up and up and up till he couldn't see the top.

But running now, running to who knows where, it seemed as though everything had fallen. Of course, not to injure or harm him. Everything fell because it was fine as it was. It was fine falling, as long as he was running and was away from cats. Cats were stressful, he'd come to learn, very stressful. Especially when they all seemed to hate another, and that other just happened to be oneself.

His paws moved quicker and quicker and quicker, slamming endlessly against the ground covered by pine needles, and he felt no pricks of pain like usual. He didn't mind the usual pricklings of pain but this time it just seemed to be dulled as if the pain helped him settle into his home. The home within his mind of course.

The tom's tail was a flag behind him, fluttering and streaming out in a fluid motion, and his ears were pinned tightly to his skull. He was not afraid nor upset yet he didn't allow them to lift, for he felt if he did, he'd disrupt or ruin something.

In his running cycle, his mind was empty. Not the bad sort of empty, where no thoughts floated within his head, where it was deserted and desolate and sad, but simply it was vacant of any and all upsetting thoughts. Only pleasant ones skimped in, and only they stuck around for a little bit. Nothing seemed to be able to be held onto as a thought in his mind as he kept on running.

Did he mind? No.

Cougarstar.

Rapidly his speed decreased and he seemed to pull to an abrupt stop, but his limbs did not comply with that idea, and he rammed headfirst into a tree.

Rearing backward and swallowing a hiss, the tom shook his head intensely as if to get the pain away that he felt. His head began to ache, slowly at first, before it turned into some sort of writhing, shivering, painful mass within his brain, his mind, infecting his happiness and infecting how he felt.

He rocked absently on his paws before he fell to the ground, groaning. It *hurt*, and bad.

He ruined it all again.

He couldn't be mad at Coguarstar. He wasn't even here. Was he? A light spark of panic consumed Adderheart but he laid his head on his paws, burying his head there. He couldn't believe it. How had a simple thought of the leader caused him to mess up so badly while running? Was something happening back at camp?

There's no way that I just happened to randomly think of Cougarstar, right?

Adderheart sniffled, pulling himself closer to the tree behind him. He lifted a paw tentatively to his skull and found there to be a little scrape on his head. Of course, it was covered by fur, but he could still feel the sticky blood around it, and he cringed, pulling his paw back. Giving it a few licks, he ran it over where the bump had begun to form.

He was displeased with the events of the 'hunting trip' that didn't even turn into a hunting trip.. all because of his stupid mind, he was injured now, and it wasn't all that easy to go to the healers anymore, not after Willowdapple and the incident regarding her.

And it wasn't like he could go back to Willowdapple to check on the kits.

The kits. He was reminded of the names that were given to them and absently he truly wondered why they had been named the way they were. Had the queen been particularly close to the elders? And if so, how come he'd not caught it? They had to of been close, right?

I should've noticed.

Frustration pulsed within him. How come nothing went right? *I was just... running. How did I mess up? I'm a good runner. That's one of my finest skills of all time. Running and hunting. I can't even do that right...? No, I can. I can! It's just a little mistake.*

...right?

A truly sad frown rose upon his features, and it wasn't the kind that was pouty or whiny. It was truly, genuinely sad, because he just felt sad. Really just... sad. Why? He didn't know. Because everything seemed to be going wrong? Maybe. The sadness didn't seem to directly have a reason for appearing so suddenly.

He was actually able to talk to Pantherleap now, unlike before, when his conversations were short, stupid, random bits of a cat's day that he didn't care about. And they didn't care about him, either. He was just a blank face, perhaps one that messed up a bit more often than expected. Pantherleap was one he could speak to somewhat easily-

No, I'm not. I'm angry with him.

The warrior's form stilled.

...is that why I'm sad?

Immediately, he rose to his paws, whipping around and shaking his head. No. Surely not. He didn't want to think about it anymore. Adderheart turned slightly, spotting that he wasn't close to camp at all. Obviously. *That's what running away does.*

So, once more did he turn around and charge off toward the camp.

chapter sixteen

Upon arriving at the camp, there seemed to be something off.

It was as if someone had stolen all the comfortability of a camp and replaced it with knives, with blood, with everything that one would associate with... well, bad things. Adderheart didn't like it but couldn't pinpoint it, and had no way to rid himself of it.

However, along the journey, his head began to hurt more and more, and it was not helped by the fact that the sun was now able to slant directly into his eyes. It was the cause of all pain. Not only was seeing difficult, due to the fact that sun now seemed to be everywhere, his head felt like it was to explode.

The warrior paused at the entrance, letting a paw rise to his head to feel the bump, and he jumped a bit. It had not shrunk at all, rather it had grown, but instead of upward, it seemed to have been spread outward.

He couldn't really go to the healers for it at all. If Willowdapple happened to be visiting, she'd have a fit. Probably throw him out of the den if she could, if she wanted to... his ears twitched, threatening to flatten. He knew he needed and wanted medical attention for the bump now the headache that was surfacing.

No matter how hard he tried to push it away, or even just let it be, it seemed to get worse and worse. It felt like it was pressing against the edges of his head, threatening to implode within any moment.

Why did I have to do that? He grumbled something inaudibly alongside the thought, placing his paw back on the ground. The world lightly spun around him, running in circles, giggling loudly at his injury.

Carefully, he slipped into camp, but the sight and smell wasn't something he was expecting.

Upon the highrock sat Cougarstar, pointedly staring down at the Clan. His tail whipped back and forth, gaze a mist of daggers. Most cats were gathered, fur either bristling or strangely smooth, and the audible sound of shuffling from the medicine cat's den could be heard from anywhere within the clearing.

The smell was strange, to say the least. It was somewhat clean, yet it was tainted by a metallic, horrific scent that came rushing back to the warrior with extreme force. The air, clean and crisp with fury, was tainted by none other than blood, and it caused an icy shiver to inch its way down the tom's spine.

"Be more careful around the borders," the leader ordered, eyes swiping around sharply as if picking out any cats that would disagree with him. "Nobody is to be injured as badly as that patrol."

What?

Quickly, Adderheart pulled himself to the wall of camp, pressing against it as to disguise himself. There was no way he was about to be yelled at in front of the entire Clan. The thought of an excuse popped into his head and he was reminded that he'd done no hunting at all.

Because of him! The warrior's dark gray eyes switched up to focus on the leader, who appeared to be growing angrier. At first, he didn't seem so upset, just mildly irritated if anything. Yet, now, it appeared to morph to a more prominent fury.

"Rogues are becoming more and more of a problem and I do not appreciate everyone just blowing it off for nothing," he announced. "Many of us seem to just be ignoring the clear signs that rogues are not just another passing issue."

It's too early for rogues... there couldn't have been another encounter... right?

"It is early, but that does not mean everyone just gets to slack off!" The tawny leader's voice rose sharply. "In fact, everyone should be *more* on alert. If we show them that we will not back down, then it's possible they'll leave us alone. No cat should be off alert!"

You're the only one who seems to be ignoring it!

A small, whitish-brown she-cat carefully rose beside him. Tinydust, he knew, without even seeing the she-cat in full. He didn't need to. He knew her movements and her voice, too:

"Come on, you've explained well enough."

Her soft, gentle, yet coaxing words drifted delicately toward the leader, floating on an unworn racetrack, soon to be traveled again and again until it was broken and decrepit.

"No," he snapped, "I don't want to."

"Come on, Cougarstar, I—"

He turned to her, glowering, furious, raging even at her. He didn't want to go, clearly. The tawny tom snarled something inaudibly before slamming a paw down on the ground. Tinydust's voice dropped drastically before the tom lifted a paw.

She went still, and the leader simply swiped his paw underneath her leg.

Her figure seemed to collapse instantly, body falling to the ground as she rolled straight off the highrock and onto the ground, where her form became splayed.

Cougarstar let out a furious screech and launched himself off the rock, and at this time everyone had rushed forward, off to crowd the she-cat. Adderheart, seeing his chance, quickly ran up and squeezed himself in a random spot in the crowd.

All around cats whispered, hissed, muttered, screamed—everything. Everyone was trying to see if the little she-cat was okay, if Cougarstar had accidentally harmed her, if everything was *going* to be okay.

Sootdawn was at the front, prodding the she-cat fiercely. "Tinydust? Tinydust?" She turned to hiss something at Cougarstar, but Bearpatch barreled through the rest of the cats.

"Mother!" He exclaimed, tail whipping and slapping a few cats in the face, all of which grumbled and reared back, though they were quick to lean forward.

"Get out of the way!" Sootdawn raised her voice, whipping around to stare furiously at a few warriors, namely Beetlepath, who had rushed up to the front. "You're in the way!"

"Tinydust, I said this would happen!" hissed Cougarstar, watching as the healers swept out.

"What happened?" Twilightcloud demanded, pushing past the crowd to get to the front. As she reached the scene, her mouth dropped open to a gasp, and she whipped around, bounding across the clearing toward the healer's den.

Coalbelly was quick to replace the healer and the dark-furred she-cat worked quickly. She crouched to the ground, managing to slide Tinydust onto her back, and she swiftly waddled away.

Cougarstar watched, his eyes a storm of wrath. However, he said nothing else and simply turned around, entering his den with his tail whipping behind him.

Adderheart watched as a few cats ran after the healer and after a quick decision he followed, rapidly shaking his head as if to clear his mind. How had it all happened so fast, and how was it over now?

Everyone seemed dazed. It was as if nobody really believed in had occurred in the first place. Had it been their imagination? Had everyone simultaneously imagined it at the same time, with the same events following it?

Somehow it was well-known that Cougarstar was vicious, but not *that* vicious.

Yet, they all knew it would simply be passed as an accident, even though they all knew it wasn't. Adderheart noted the looks on the cats' faces. Mostly nervous or scared, some inquisitive or curious, though of course tension still tainted the air like blood.

Blood.

The tom was reminded of the patrol earlier and couldn't help but wonder who exactly had been on that patrol. Perhaps the apprentices and their mentors had caught the rogues on accident. But wouldn't there have been much more of a fuss with younger cats?

His ear twitched as he watched the camp stumble about. Nobody knew what to do. It had never really been a possibility for anyone, clearly. The brown tabby pelt of Runningfoot approached the spot where Tinydust had fallen and spotted a speck or two of blood, causing him to rear backward with disgust and horror.

Of course, this drew the attention of the majority of the cats within the camp, including Russetpelt, Antwhisper, Poppyfur... most of the middle-aged warriors. The majority seemed to back away with a hiss after a few moments, however, some stuck around, including Antwhisper and Poppyfur. The latter pranced over the blood, grinning widely as if she didn't understand.

Birdwish was quick to sprint over and lead the she-cat away, murmuring softly to her as a few onlookers shared confused looks. It was as if Poppyfur didn't exactly understand what had occurred—perhaps she'd missed the entire thing completely and just thought it to be some old, crusty blood upon the ground?

However, a sharp call split the clearing.

"Adderheart, Tinydust wants to see you."

The voice was Cougarstar's.

What?

Suppressing a shiver, he rose to his paws, figure stiff. Padding across the clearing was not a pleasant activity. Not ever, of course, but it was much, much worse now. It felt like everyone's gazes had been suddenly and harshly glued to his pale pelt, and he quickly sped up, weaving into the healer's den.

He spotted Tinydust. Her fur was wet and she shivered every few

moments. Had she been forced awake with cold water...?

"Pantherleap wants t-to talk with y-you," she whispered, teeth chattering.

His ears pricked as he turned. What was Pantherleap doing in the healer's den? The warrior gazed around, noting the offshoot nearby. It appeared to be clogged with a scent, one that would happen to be blood, and a horrible stone of cold terror dropped into his belly.

Pantherleap was on the patrol.

Swallowing anxiously, the tom made his way through the offshoot, and as soon as he knew he was out of the view of the other cats within the den, his ears pinned tightly to his skull. Eyes flashing, he swiftly wove through the offshoot. It felt like it was so long, like a tall tree turned sideways and he was walking through the trunk.

Finally, he came upon a small area, with moss and a few leaves dotted around. Within the makeshift nest that was settled in the middle was a familiar face.

"Pantherleap!" He exclaimed, and the warrior looked up, eyes curious. However, they sharpened, and Adderheart flinched. Suddenly, he didn't know what to say.

He'd been planning to say something. About the patrol, no, maybe, he didn't know, not anymore. All the information seemed to have instantly drained out of his brain, out of his mind, replaced with stupid white fluff that filled his senses and clogged the well-worn tracks within his head. *What was I going to say?*

"What's... the bump on your head...?" Pantherleap asked, reaching a paw upward to lightly swipe at Adderheart's forehead. "It looks... painful."

Adderheart studied the tawny tom for a few moments. He still seemed to be suffering from a sort of forgetfulness, or perhaps some issue with his speech that caused him to pause. Pantherleap appeared to be in a strange daze if anything. It was as if the warrior was surrounded by a white fluff, similar to the one within his head.

"Nothing, nothing," he mumbled with a flick of his tail in a dismissive manner, sitting down next to Pantherleap. "I heard about... the, the patrol," he said, uncertainly. "What happened?"

Pantherleap tucked his paws underneath his form and he sighed softly. "It... there were rogues." His tone was soft, airy, and it was nothing like the tinge of metallic blood that stained the air. "I didn't recognize any of them, and none of them looked like Carmin... A couple she-cats, some toms. They were... skilled. Very skilled. One seemed to be following some of the others around..."

"...like mentors," Adderheart finished, turning to stare at Pantherleap. "The rogues are training their young? What are we meant to do?"

Pantherleap shrugged slowly, tipping his head a bit. "I don't... know." An odd spark lit in Adderheart's chest, but he smothered it. Too strange. It would distract him.

"Did they have a leader?"

"Didn't seem... like it."

"How many she-cats?"

"Don't remember."

"Toms?"

"...the same."

Adderheart's ear twitched absently, a blink soon following. "Who else was on the patrol?"

"I'm... not allowed to... say."

"*What*? Who said that? Who set that rule?"

He's not telling me things in favor of listening to the 'rules' set up by some random cat.

Pantherleap buried his head in his paws, rapidly shaking his skull

back and forth. The muffled reply came a few moments after the original movement, and the tone was almost, well, broken.

"...guess."

Cougarstar.

The pale-furred warrior rose to his paws, fury causing his fur to spike instantly. He couldn't believe it. Cougarstar was being the worst leader to ever exist. *Ever!* He couldn't control his Clan's borders and when he tried he blamed it on the Clan itself. No, no. It could never be his fault. Not like it was reasonable for cats to make mistakes or anything!

Pantherleap looked up and his expression was dazed as if he had been brainwashed or something stupid like that. *Stupid. Everything is stupid!* The words rang in Adderheart's head and he saw Pantherleap's mouth moving as if he was attempting to speak, but he didn't hear anything.

It didn't matter. At least, at that moment it didn't. To any other, it likely would have. *Well, if any cat in this Clan had a scrap of consideration for others! I'm surprised everyone rushed forward like that, with Tinydust.* He slammed a paw down on the ground but he couldn't hear the thump that followed. *And Cougarstar won't even get a StarClan-forsaken punishment for it because there's no balance of power in this stupid Clan!*

Nobody can fix it because he won't let up his power! He's the problem! The pale-furred warrior shook his head tersely and rapidly from side to side as if attempting to allow the world to dissipate around him. His vision seemed to disappear, replaced with a strange brightness that allowed bits of shadow around him, and he stumbled backward, opening his jaws as if to yowl, yet nothing escaped him.

Rage clamped a heavy paw upon the pale-furred warrior, followed by the rush of blood in his ears. Cougarstar couldn't even admit to the fact that he'd made errors within his leadership and *even better* he wouldn't even fix them! He *could.* He most certainly could fix them yet he didn't. *What kind of leader doesn't fix issues? And how*

come nobody cares about them, either?!

What kind of leader makes stupid, stupid rules and then refuses to fix them? How come he's the one everyone likes? Does anyone like him? Does anyone even like him? Adderheart's lips drew back in a snarl at no cat in particular and he stumbled backward, bristling tail whipping upward as he studied Pantherleap. The tawny tom's head was tipped and his mouth moved slowly.

It was like Pantherleap was simply a dove. Pleasant, soft, attempting to fix whatever he could for he knew that anger did nothing. Experience, perhaps, taught him that, but he was attempting to help an eagle with curved, hooked talons and a merciless jaw. White feathers against edged talons did nothing, really, but the dove still tried.

And suddenly the world melted away for the eagle.

The blood rushing within his ears disappeared and his fur smoothed down. All of the thoughts within his head seemed to dissipate within an instant, ears pricking slowly. He blinked once, twice, three times, and finally, Pantherleap's voice registered.

"...your head...?"

Adderheart rapidly shook his head and found it to be spinning. Well, his head wasn't spinning. The world was. Everything seemed... wrong. Pantherleap looked concerned, confused, worried, all sorts of things, yet his figure had a sort of cascading shadow. It draped delicately around his head and seemed to curl around his neck, pulling tighter and tighter.

The minimal light within the den gleamed and shimmered brighter as he stopped shaking his head. In front of him, and in a weird hazy state, he watched as Pantherleap lightly patted the ground with his tail in a rather shadowed spot of the den. It appeared even darker than it actually was to Adderheart, and unsteadily he managed his way over.

"Was it... your head?" The question echoed softly within Adderheart's senses and he shrugged, lifting a paw to haphazardly

place it over his muzzle as if to block out the world around him. With a small sniffle, the pale warrior glanced to Pantherleap. His head had begun to hurt again, and more and more he worried that the strange white light with the loss of his senses would return.

The pain within his head suddenly escalated and he shuffled closer to Pantherleap.

"My head hurts..." The mumble escaped Adderheart's muzzle after a few moments and the broader-structured warrior inched closer to Adderheart and wrapped his tail around the pale-furred tom. Both of them seemed to inch back into the shadows where they were hidden from prying eyes or furious glances.

"It's okay..." whispered Pantherleap. "We'll... wake up tomorrow morning. And... it'll be okay again."

Upon the pale tom's features rose a light frown but he seemed to dismiss it. Carefully, he laid his head on his paws and shifted all the closer to Pantherleap. His heart swelled and he mindlessly shoved away a few thoughts of which he did not like. A pleasant warmth surrounded him and after a few moments had passed, he heard the soft and rhythmic breathing of Pantherleap.

Soon enough he fell into a similar slumber.

chapter seventeen

When he woke, it was with a start. Panic rose like a flame within him, immediately leaping upward to spread hot licks of heat across his throat. His dark gray eyes shot open and although he felt warm with a figure of a cat next to him, cold terror spread over him like water freezing over.

Though it was the next morning and now all the other thoughts and feelings were rising within him, his head now was a dull ache. It felt as though someone had accidentally poked his injury and allowed just a spark or two of pain to come through to him. He lifted a paw carefully to his skull, finding that the swelling had nearly dissipated. He laid it down gently.

The pale-furred warrior studied Pantherleap carefully, trying to fight down the waves of panic. *Nobody has seen us, and if he wakes up in time, nobody* will *see us.*

However, despite the clear reasoning within his thoughts, a different side of his head rose sharper and louder than all the rest within his already clogged and crowded head.

What if they think we're... we're...

No. They'd be stupid.

It's reasonable!

"Adderheart?"

The mentioned warrior lightly turned his head, allowing it to tip the side as if in question.

"Did we... I... fall asleep here?" Pantherleap's voice was soft and confused like a kit out of a nest for the first time.

He swallowed, a million emotions flashing beneath a mask he had hurriedly slipped on. "I believe so."

"Did anyone see us?" Of course that question would follow.

"I don't believe so." It was true. He didn't think anyone had seen the two, for if they had, it was likely that Cougarstar would have rushed in with his muzzle drawn back in fury, spitting insults and roaring for them to be injured and then thrown out of the Clan at once with no hesitation.

Pantherleap nodded slowly, laying his head back on his paws in a rather lengthy manner. He swept his tail tightly around his large and broad figure and the senior warrior seemed to settle in closer to Adderheart. Surprise flitted through him but he moved closer back to the tom. A small wave of warmth overtook the panic.

He inched a bit so that his left paw had laid delicately over Pantherleap's right. A light silence had filled the air, clogging his senses with a sort of nice white fluff that caused the wave of warmth to turn stronger as it lit a match. Adderheart gave a small smile, blinking a little, and the other tom allowed a frown to surface momentarily upon his features, nudging him a little bit.

"Hey, don't capture my paw. I need it."

With the spark of warmth dampening, he removed his paw, but Pantherleap looked over to Adderheart with an expression that said 'are you serious?'.

"What?" Adderheart questioned softly.

Pantherleap stared at him for a few moments longer as if expecting him to realize something, but he didn't, and the tawny tom simply suppressed a snicker and placed his own paw over Adderheart's. Swallowing, Adderheart shifted closer to Pantherleap, who murmured something.

"I'm cold." Pantherleap glanced at Adderheart, who in turn moved his tail around the other tom, and a smile rose upon the tawny tom's features. Adderheart pressed his features firmly against the ground, nodding somewhat stiffly, though he attempted to make it seem more casual.

Adderheart purred softly and Pantherleap murmured something inaudibly. He didn't care what he'd said. He was content as he was. Everything seemed to fade away, focusing solely upon the two within the den, comfortably settled beside each other. A few thoughts drifted into Adderheart's head and he lightly nudged them away.

They came back once more and he shifted a bit, shoving them away harshly. He didn't need to worry about that.

The two lay there for a few moments more until Pantherleap's ears perked sharply.

"Hm...?" Adderheart looked over to the tawny tom, who quickly sprung to his paws, pausing momentarily, before strolling right out.

"Pantherleap—?" Adderheart cut himself off and anxiously scrambled backward into the shadows.

"Tired, I see." The comment was accompanied with a soft sniffle. It was Tinydust. In the silence that followed, Adderheart could only guess that Pantherleap had nodded. "I see. Would you like an herb for energy? We could snag something from the stores."

"I'd rather just wait until they're awake... so we can get the most effective one," Pantherleap replied.

"But why would you wait?" A tinge of irritation filled her tone. "Just take some now, it'll be fine. I can get it for you."

"No, really. It's fine. I'll be fine." The tone was dismissive and a light shuffle reached his ears. A hiss soon came after, followed by the stomping of paws and a whisk of a furious tail flick.

Pantherleap ducked his head back into the offshoot and his voice echoed. "Come on!"

Adderheart rose to his paws and, glancing around at the area once more, bounded out. His pawsteps were soft yet quick, swerving as he came to the main part of the den. He heard the faint scuffling of paws and he sprung for the entrance, leaving to be met with a burst of light.

Quickly circling the den and taking a few more generous bounds, the tom eventually settled down near the camp's entrance. His tail wrapped around his slim figure and he began to groom his pelt, trying to smooth it down.

The sun had risen into the sky, providing lovely peachy tones for the camp. The entire territory was bathed in a tangerine light, accented by the pale blush tones that spread in the sky. However, despite the rather warm tones, it wasn't all that warm actually within the camp.

Chilly winds approached the camp carefully, racing in and ruining the fur of anyone nearby, for it was sure to kick up enough fuss to do so. It whistled, too, gently though not quietly, as if to indicate the approaching leaf-bare. *Could it really be that soon?*

This is... just a cold spell. Right? Adderheart's ear twitched as his mind wandered. If it happened to be an early leaf-bare then surely the rogues would be infringing much more, unless they didn't exactly know either and didn't wish to guess.

He was reminded of the patrol that Pantherleap had been on and his tail flicked sharply. He wondered where it had occurred, and if it had been fairly easy to access, perhaps he could go and do some digging to see what was really going on. *Would it be possible to pick up scent trails?*

It was a doubtful thing, he knew, to think that he would be able to go to the place where the patrol's incident had happened. Of course he wouldn't be allowed there — anybody else, as well, but him specifically. *Well, not necessarily.*

If Cougarstar were to find out, the leader would throw a fit, surely. After the explosive speech, Adderheart was sure that no cat was bound to stand up to him soon, for fear of Tinydust's situation happening again to someone they knew or even to them. *He wants us to solve the problem, not inspect it.*

If we want to learn more about it, then inspection is necessary. The thought flitted through his head and he huffed somewhat absently. Cougarstar didn't understand. He was so blinded by, what, power,

he didn't know, but he was blinded. And the blindness caused him to be unable to see, of course.

He made no attempt to see. It was as if he liked being blind, for it protected him, in a way.

See what? Anything, really. It was as if the leader could only see his tawny paws beneath his large, strong, intelligent form. If he made a decision he could only see how it affected him and perhaps anyone within his tiny circle. If it affected him badly, then there'd be no doubt he'd go back on it.

And if he barely allowed his vision to expand past the usual circle, then there were cats like Tinydust surrounding him, cats like Palewhisker, even cats like Bearpatch. But before it could stretch further, it inched back in. If anything were to happen while it was expanded, it was sure to shrink back in.

Though, due to the lessened vision, he couldn't see when things were dangerous for others. And *usually,* a *normal* deputy would be able to assist in that field. The deputy of a Clan helped ensure that all the warriors were fine, as some of the opinions that warriors held didn't always get straight to the leader.

But the deputy was corrupted in a similar fashion to the leader above them, and the heir below the deputy wasn't able to speak up. Well, they could. Any and all heirs could if they truly wished to do so, and really under any circumstance, an heir would have more power than a deputy. But it was as if this specific heir was unable to speak.

Cougarstar's fault. Likely the upbringing that Bearpatch had suffered from had caused his silence. Absently, the warrior wondered if Bearpatch even liked Sootdawn. He briefly realized that even if he didn't, that didn't matter, as the two would be forced to have kits anyway.

He shivered absently, a chilly breeze dancing around his slim figure and he glanced around the camp. There were a few cats milling around, including none other than Bearpatch. The heir was settled near the fresh-kill pile, digging into a mouse. He appeared content.

Palewhisker padded out of his den nearby, and along with him, he dragged a plump creature. It was hidden from Adderheart's view, though he presumed it was also prey, as he bit into it with ease and happiness, apparently. A rather bright smile was present upon his features.

But it wasn't a true 'bright' smile. It was more of a sardonic smile, one that spread from the fact that he knew he was better than everyone else. That he could eat more than everyone else and nobody would say anything. That he could sleep wherever he wanted and nobody could do anything about it.

Bearpatch didn't carry that same smile. Well, he didn't carry a smile at all. Instead, he was just blank, appearing to simply be a slate of whatever the camp felt. Which, was mostly nothing, as only a few milled around. He did not take on the state of Palewhisker, though.

He wondered why, and absently Adderheart wondered if the two toms got along. If so, did they hunt a lot frequently? *Well, Bearpatch doesn't leave the camp all too often. I'm sure Palewhisker prefers to be inside of the camp compared to wandering the territory.*

Most do, I suppose. Adderheart's tail curled absently over his paws, shifting his position almost nervously as if he was worried that someone could see into his thoughts and read him exactly. *What if someone can read my thoughts? Hello? Can someone read this?*

Immediately after thinking so, he wanted to slam his head into the ground beneath his slim form for thinking something so dumb. He lifted a paw and rapidly licked it, drawing it briskly over his ear as if to cleanse himself from the idiotic thought.

Stop worrying.

He told himself in a rather strict way as he let his mind wander once more to the Clans' politics.

Politics... it was a touchy subject, and not one that many seemed to rush for. In SageClan, "politics" consisted of arguing over random things concerning the Clan, most commonly the rogues that attacked every leaf-bare. Usually, it happened outside of camp, due

to the fact that Cougarstar would rush out and snarl at cats who disagreed with him.

Because of course, it just so happened that the tawny tom was listening the entire time and he had caught all of the sounds that every cat had uttered, and not only that. He'd learned precisely who disliked him or disagreed the tiniest bit with his ideals.

So cats took to discussions outside of camp... meaning that a lot of the lazier cats missed out. Or the cats who couldn't leave the camp, like elders or queens, and even kits. Not that the kits knew about the politics of course, but some knew bits and pieces of what was meant to be politics.

The kits had their own worries anyway.

Worries much smaller than the warriors' worries, of course, but not any less pressing. To them, a lost game of mossball was as important as losing a battle or something similar. The kits didn't necessarily believe their issues more important than the warriors.

Most didn't even know of the issues concerning the majority of the Clan. It was a heavily guarded secret. Well, there were many heavily guarded secrets. It seemed to spread outward. The first level was secrets within the two highest cats in the Clan, consequently Cougarstar and his mate.

Perhaps, the two highest would change at times. Some believed it to be Cougarstar and Palewhisker, others Bearpatch and his father. Regardless, from there it stretched down to the healers and the permanent queens. Furthermore, it skimped past them and toward the senior warriors.

The senior warriors didn't necessarily receive more information than other warriors. They, along with generally being more respected, just had more ties to the highranks and therefore seemed to gain a lot more quips of information. It wasn't like the leader shared information freely to the highranks. Of course not. That would be stupid to Cougarstar.

After the senior warriors came the usual warriors. They got

information, mostly, from Clan meetings, however, some got bits and pieces of gossip from the older warriors. Russetpelt, although not the youngest warrior, was the younger brother of Fernfall.

Information was shared between the two, no doubt. After the warriors came the apprentices and really, they had no more information than the warriors. The younger apprentices had a little less, considering that their mentors usually didn't share much with them, and the older ones were around the camp less, meaning they missed meetings called by Cougarstar. Undoubtedly, he didn't care about that. He only wanted the best for him and him only. Perhaps a little bit of that care went to his mate.

After the apprentices, surprisingly, came the queens — those not permanent, obviously. They got little bits and pieces of information from the apprentices that came in to help them. Only some of the apprentices would actually have conversations with the queens, and if they did, they were usually rather short and sharp.

The queens liked talking to others, as far as he could gather. They spent their entire days with kits who either jumped around all day and all night or who cried and cried until they got what they wanted. He felt almost guilty for them, really.

They didn't get to converse much with warriors. Some of the queens' siblings or parents, if alive, visited them, but how long those visits were, he didn't know. He had to presume they were fairly short, however. The tom shifted upon the ground.

After the queens were elders. It was occasional that cats would stop by the elders and chat a bit. Mostly, the apprentices would gossip around and near the den, and despite the fact that some had suffering hearing, it was still rather sharp. They picked up on a lot of gossip that floated around.

The pale-furred warrior rose to his paws with a flicker of his tail.

He glanced around the camp, wondering what to do. He wanted to go hunting but found it useless to leave the camp at this point. The sky was somewhat light. It was mid-afternoon, at least he assumed so, with the sun hanging up in the sky.

It spread pleasant light across and around the camp, and although there were clouds up in the sky, it was still a fairly bright day. Though, he wasn't going to hunt. He just felt... tired. It was as if someone had plunked a heavy set of weights upon his shoulders. So, simply, he turned around and headed for the warrior's den. Ducking into the den with a swift movement, he slunk toward his nest.

He ensured that his pawsteps were soft and quiet. He wasn't about to ruin or disrupt any of the nearby nests, and so he crept carefully toward his own. As he reached it he settled down, wrapping his tail around his form.

And within a few moments, he had slipped into a comfortable and light slumber.

chapter eighteen

Adderheart woke up to light sunlight streaming through the den.

He'd slept the entire day away, slept the entire night away, and now it was the next morning. That was the only answer as to why it was so bright. He cracked open his eyes, dark gray gaze sharp beneath his eyelids as he shuffled his position. He didn't really want to get up.

Absently, he wondered if anyone would actually notice if he were to stay in the den the entire day. Maybe Cougarstar would just hold it against him, but would any of the other warriors care if he stayed in the den? Well, they likely would *care* but would they report him to Cougarstar or to Bearpatch?

And would Bearpatch care? Would anyone? Palewhisker? Pantherleap would likely think something to be wrong but what if he didn't? Then what? Would anyone come to check in on him? Adderheart's face twisted into a frown and he buried his head in his paws as if to hide from the world that seemed to be getting heavier and heavier around and on him, pressing on his chest forcefully.

Tiredness dragged his limbs down like a heavyset weight. He felt tired even though he'd just slept for a fair bit of time, and despite this, he pulled himself to his paws. He cleared his throat, shook his head as if to clear his mind from the want to lay back down and to fall into slumber once more, and he carefully picked his way through the den till he exited.

He spotted a few cats gathered and chattering at the entrance of camp, to his surprise. Cats were almost never up this early, no matter the moon or day. Well, except battle days.

"...excited!" Birchpaw's bright and excited chirp cut the clearing's pleasant and soft silence.

"So am I," Finchpaw agreed. "I think we'll all do well."

Their mid-assessments.

Fluffyflame, Fernfall, and Freckletuft all stood near their apprentices, surveying each of them sharply. However, there was a fourth cat to stand in as Finchpaw's mentor, and that cat was none other than Marigoldcry. The thick-furred she-cat offered quiet words to Finchpaw, who nodded seriously.

Marigoldcry has never helped with a single one of Finchpaw's training sessions. I *have. So why aren't I over there, helping with the mid-assessment for the apprentice I helped train?*

"You'll all do fine, I'm sure," Marigoldcry announced as if she was some sort of leader over the rest of the mentors and apprentices, staring at each of them for a few moments each with a glint in her eye like she expected them to do outstanding and nothing less.

"However, if you don't, something will..." Fluffyflame's lip curled and he continued, "...something will have to happen."

"Like what?" Birchpaw asked. It seemed as though he wasn't attempting to irritate the mentors, but it was going to do so anyway.

It wasn't by fault of his own. Marigoldcry was just *touchy* like that. It was as if she cradled a stone heart, and if one were to poke too sharply or hack harshly at it with a hammer, it'd break and she'd hate everything and everyone forever and ever and ever.

Definitely not qualities that are preferable or wanted in a mentor.

"It, well, doesn't matter right now," Freckletuft commented with a dismissive flick of her tail. "You won't be falling into that sort of trap, so it won't matter to you."

"Understand?" Marigoldcry looked sharply to Birchpaw, who seemed to swallow nervously and nod. The thick-furred she-cat gave a satisfied nod, backing up a bit as she continued to watch as the other three mentors took over once more.

He stopped a frown from rising on his features as he watched the group.

"Now, remember, you're meant to prove yourself through this assessment," came the murmur of Fernfall. "This isn't something to do for fun or just to fool around with. It's a real assessment, and there's a possibility that Cougarstar could be judging your scores."

A hushed silence fell upon the apprentices. They weren't scared of the assessment. It only appeared that they were nervous about the outcome of it. Had they been around during the incident regarding Cougarstar and Tinydust, and if so, what had they done?

He attempted to recall the memory but he couldn't, no matter how hard he tried. Eventually, after another portion of a longer, drawn-out speech from Fluffyflame, the apprentices and their mentors scampered out of the camp. Finchpaw, however, paused at the entrance.

The she-cat glanced around the clearing and her gaze stopped on Adderheart. She said nothing but let her left ear twitch, blinking once at him, and then her ears pricked as if she had been called away. She quickly turned around and sprinted out of the camp.

Frustration pulsed inside of him like a huge, crying, messy monster. How come he never could do anything right? Finchpaw, although not his apprentice, *felt* like she was his apprentice, and so he naturally held a more protective side for the she-cat. He knew that she likely didn't care very much. She had a social life outside of protecting her 'mentor' and his feelings.

He didn't feel betrayed by her by any means. It wasn't up to her, it wasn't her choice. However, it *was* the mentors' choices, and yes, he felt betrayed. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. He should've expected that he didn't get to help with their mid-assessments but he wanted to. That was better than Marigoldcry! *She looked miserable!*

His tail whipped with anger as he looked around the clearing, half expecting a grinning warrior to emerge from the brambles after watching him. Of course, no cat emerged, and the pale-furred tom was left relatively alone in the middle of camp, due to the fact that there didn't seem to be many awake yet. It was early.

Of course, I'm *the one who actually wants to be up, yet gets no recognition for it.* He thought, tail dragging against the dirt beneath his figure, and the pale tom padded over to the fresh-kill pile. Against his best wishes, he presumed it would be a good idea to eat something. He likely would be assigned a patrol today. He actually sort of hoped so.

With no assigned patrols as usual, he felt lonely and unsure of what to do. The pale tom needed some form of regularity within his daily schedule and the lack of patrols and hunting didn't help that. In reality, nothing that was going on helped that. The rogues, the fights... His ear twitched as he glanced down at the fresh-kill pile.

It seemed somewhat populated. Perhaps there had been an even earlier patrol. He plucked a small mouse from the pile and noted that on its thin brownish fur lay some frost. His lip curled with disgust but he wasn't going to put it back. It was a fine piece of prey, overall. He could just lay his paw on the frost and it would melt.

And that was what he did when he settled down.

He was quick to sit in his usual spot in camp. It was almost his classic place now, ever since the incidents that had occurred there. They rose within his head, flashing with colors and emotions and he shoved them down, a paw lifting to rub at his muzzle absently.

The mouse was fine, he soon found. It had originally tasted strange, but it was fine overall.

He rose to his paws and stretched, yawning with his jaws opening wide as he snapped them closed. Glancing around, he spotted Pantherleap padding toward the camp entrance. Swiftly, Adderheart trotted up behind him.

"Hi," he said softly, to which the tawny warrior jumped in surprise. Whipping around, his head tipped upon seeing Adderheart. However, understanding filled his gaze, and the warrior bounded off.

Wait, don't go!

Adderheart sprinted after him, launching into a run. The trees blurred in the edges of his vision and the logs nearby seemed to just be flashes of color, yet he still ran.

The run wasn't too long. Pantherleap slowly managed to get his pace average and normal before he skittered to a stop, tail whipping like a flag behind him as if to steady himself. Adderheart pulled himself to a stop, inhaling sharply as he pressed a paw into the ground. It was firm and hard as if frost had crept in.

Sunlight shimmered into both cats' eyes and he shifted, blinking to get rid of the gleam within his vision.

"What?" Adderheart prompted, studying the warrior with something like concern.

"Did you want to go hunting or something?" Pantherleap asked, and he was quick to add, "I thought you did. Did you not?"

"I did," he assured the warrior swiftly. "I did. It's fine, I just didn't expect it to happen." A light laugh was forced from his jaws, rather stiff and awkward, and his ear twitched uncomfortably.

Pantherleap's nose twitched absently and Adderheart shifted. A silence filled the air and the latter warrior felt suffocated by it... the silence felt as though it was clogging all of his senses at once and making it impossible to breathe, and it made his vision all shaky and weird and bright again. As if in a light retaliation, he stumbled backward, and Pantherleap looked to him, concerned.

"What's wrong?" He asked, and his voice wasn't truly concerned. It was the casual tone that he'd use with any warrior, and not *him.* Adderheart thought it was different. *I thought it was different. I thought it was different!*

"Nothing, nothing is wrong," he assured quickly and padded away. Consequently, he trailed around a few trees, and he called haphazardly over his shoulder, "I'm going to hunt."

He heard a reply but it was muffled. Muffled by the sound of his own thoughts rising and clambering within his skull and clogging

everything up. He just couldn't think, it was too hard to think. It was too hard to walk. It felt like his legs were turning to stone and to water at the same time yet he couldn't melt nor freeze either of them, and his brain was turning slowly to stone, freezing every thought.

He tried to sort through the multitude of thoughts but a familiar string ran through his brain. *He doesn't care for you.*

But why did it matter? No other cat had cared to the extreme about him. So why was Pantherleap so different? He was related to Cougarstar! Didn't that make it worse? Was that why he was different? He continued stumbling along, edging around trees, and his breathing grew heavy as if he was lugging along a million cats upon his shoulders. Everything was too hard...

Stop, Adderheart, this isn't something to be worried about!

Sliding to the ground, and underneath a tree, he curled up tightly. Shifting so that he was curled up in the roots of it, he felt concealed and comforted by the strong, large roots of the tree. It was as if the tree was giving him a big, warm, somewhat prickly hug that no cat could offer.

But his mind did not stop whirring. It came up with millions of thoughts and possibilities, all of which he shoved away. He didn't want to think about Pantherleap anymore. He didn't want to think anymore. He just wanted to hunt, or maybe just run around till everything faded away. Or, maybe, till he found a new Clan, where he could be away from Cougarstar and Pantherleap.

If Pantherleap was out of his sight, he'd be out of mind, right? No, no. No! It didn't work like that. Frustration pulsed from him and his ears pinned tightly to his skull, pale fur beginning to bristle. But, quickly, he smoothed it down and inched closer to the tree, squeezing his eyes shut tighter.

Why? Why? Why?

And, underneath the tree, all alone, he began to cry.

He muffled the sound as best as he could. He didn't want anyone to hear and investigate. Briefly, he recalled the fact that there would be apprentices wandering the forest for their mid-assessment, but he didn't care, only buried his muzzle further into his paws.

"Adderheart...?"

No.

The scent of Pantherleap wreathed around the area and the pale warrior didn't know what to do. He could just pretend like nothing had happened or just try to sink into the tree to get away. Or get up and run. Would that be good? Would that allow him to get away from questioning?

"Adderheart?" A paw poked his flank, but it wasn't a harsh one. "What's going on?"

Delicately, he lifted his skull and looked up to the warrior. Adderheart could tell that his eyes were rimmed red, somewhat puffy, and probably unappealing. He knew that his fur was messed up and that his expression was probably all sorts of awful.

"Adderheart?" Pantherleap prompted, sitting down in front of him. His figure was stiff. "What happened?"

"Nothing," he replied, voice wobbly.

Pantherleap's tail tip twitched absently and his gaze flitted back to Adderheart. His ears perked up in a rather uniform and straight fashion, shoulders straightening.

"I know that isn't true," he claimed with a gleam within his eyes. "Tell me and maybe we can fix it."

"It's fine," he lied, rubbing his eyes with the back of his paws rapidly. He didn't want Pantherleap to see him like this at all at any time, but he supposed that couldn't happen anymore. Not with the tom just straight up coming to see him.

Pantherleap's face held a light frown for a moment. "That's... not true, Adderheart. Please tell me, I..." he stopped, swallowing

nervously. The warrior realized how close he had edged and he stumbled backward, tail tip lashing as he shook his head a bit.

"Fine. It's not true, but it's fine. I'm fine," he murmured softly, rising to his paws. He knew he looked awful but the urges to get out were growing stronger and stronger by the moment. He needed to get out before something horrible happened.

"We were going to go hunting—!" Pantherleap's voice suddenly hitched, eyes flashing with hurt, and a paw flew to his muzzle. Instantly, the emotions drained from his eyes and his whiskers twitched sharply. "I... sorry, s-sorry..."

Adderheart wanted to slam his head over and over again into the tree behind him. This wasn't meant to happen at all. He felt *guilty* for letting it happen yet he knew it wasn't his fault but he still felt bad for Pantherleap. He wanted to go over and curl up beside him and cry if he needed until it was all better.

"It isn't your fault, P-Pantherleap..." he mumbled and instantly he hated the way that his voice tripped over its own paws. It wasn't a problem with any other cat. Why was it an issue with Pantherleap?

It's because—

His muzzle scrunched up and he carefully picked his way away from the tom, trembling as he backed up away into the bushes.

"Wait, don't go—" Pantherleap's voice was a soft drifting tone. It came from his soft, pleasant, well-meaning heart and not his walled, intelligent, sharp mind. Adderheart wanted to run so badly. His lean form felt as if it was wasting away by standing there.

"S-sorry, I just can't right now, Pantherleap. It's not y-your fault," Adderheart stammered, surprised at the words from his mouth. "I—"

"Don't go!" Pantherleap launched forward, and Adderheart whipped around, preparing to run. And run for as long as he possibly could, until his legs simply withered away beneath him and he fell in a random place, away from the Clan and all the horribleness of everything.

However, a paw slammed down on his tail, and immediately he knew he had made a horrific mistake. He should have stayed and tried to make things right but now Pantherleap had him trapped. He didn't want to stay but knew that Pantherleap would make him stay.

If I cry again, will he let me go? I just... I don't want to be near him. I don't—

"Adderheart, please tell me what's wrong... I want to help you," Pantherleap mumbled softly, helping the other warrior to his paws. "Run if you want... but I'm here. To help."

chapter nineteen

Before Adderheart could even dream of saying anything, he heard a noise.

It was not a soft one for sure, otherwise, there would've been no possibility of him hearing it. In fact, it was quite the opposite. It rung out as an earsplitting yowl, one tinged and plagued by something like agony. It didn't sound feminine nor masculine, and it appeared to be muffled as if the cat or creature had been gagged by moss of some sort.

Pantherleap clearly heard it too, as his head jerked to the side, eyes sharpening at the sound.

"Did you hear that?" He asked tentatively, rising to his paws as his tail began to flick nervously against the ground. Sniffling, Adderheart nodded.

"It sounded like a scream... do you think the apprentices are in trouble?" He questioned softly.

"The apprentices?" Pantherleap turned around, head tipping as he studied the tom. "What happened to them?"

Adderheart watched as he seemed to amble away a bit and he quickly skimped after him. Anything to get away from the awful place that was now stained within his mind with tears and awful feelings. He never wanted to go back and hoped he'd never end up there by some awful, terrible 'miracle'.

He would plan to explain as he walked, not really willing to waste any time. As much as he hated thinking of it as a distraction from what had occurred to him, Pantherleap seemed to take it as one. Was it on purpose? Did the other tom take it as a distraction too? *What if he actually didn't want to help?* A pang of hurt spread through him. Why? He didn't know. He just shoved it away. He didn't want to think anymore. He wanted to explain, and actually continue with

it.

"Nothing happened. They just began their mid-assessments today," he commented, swerving lightly around a tree. Pantherleap's pace was fairly even, with pawsteps and strides that were easy and careful.

"Without you?" He asked, not turning around. The warrior leaped nimbly over a small section of pine needles but Adderheart chose to just walk straight across them. He found it strange that some others leaped over areas where it might or could minorly pain them to walk. His ear twitched.

He replied, "Yes, without me... None of them spoke to me before either. Finchpaw, she was going to say something to me, but I suppose she didn't want to."

"When?" Pantherleap prompted, and the tom stopped in his tracks. His head tipped and his ears perked as if to try and relocate the sound. Adderheart had noticed that Pantherleap seemed to be shifting a lot of the focus onto his day and what had happened to him leading up to the incident.

Is he trying to figure out what happened to me before so he can see whether or not it was caused by him?

The thought felt strange in his mind like it was a forbidden one that he could never possibly conjure up. But somehow, he did. Everything felt strange, he soon realized. The trees around seemed to peer into his soul, picking apart his mind and his thoughts until little multicolored shreds were left.

And the sun above seemed to try to pick up these shreds, to put them back together with the soft and pleasant glue of a warm and kind sun, but it was impossible. The shreds were torn and shredded beyond recognition, something never to be fixed until a certain action or set of actions were to happen.

Yet in order to figure out what those actions were, the threads needed to be put back together. Only if the threads were wrapped and put back together did they spell out the answer. But in order

for the threads to come together, the answer needed to come first... creating an endless, terrible cycle for the sufferer.

"Adderheart?" Pantherleap turned slightly to look at the tom, eyes questioning yet not rude in any sort of way. They weren't prying or sharp like the trees were, and a spark of gratitude lit up Adderheart for that. At this though, the threads seemed to tie together.

"Sorry, what? I missed that," Adderheart lied, and the words slipped right off his tongue with no issues at all.

Pantherleap muffled a sigh and then he turned once more, looking at the forest. "Never mind."

Confusion sparked deep within the pale-furred senior warrior and Adderheart carefully circled Pantherleap, standing in front of the tawny-pelted tom. He tipped his head curiously and studied him.

"What?" He prompted gently, nudging him.

"It's okay, we've just got to investigate what those sounds were," Pantherleap dismissed with a flick of his paw forming. He swiftly seemed to brush by the tom, fur touching, and Adderheart blinked, glancing after him. After a short pause, he quickly padded after the other tom. He couldn't fall behind again.

A light silence squeezed between the cats. It seemed to slowly encroach upon their minds, though not necessarily in a bad way. It only filled space, alike to a soft and fluffy blanket with all sorts of extra rainbow-colored tassels that could either get in the way or make things brighter and happier.

"Do you know where they are? Or where the sound was, if it was the apprentices?" Adderheart asked. The silence shattered instantly but he did not regret it.

"Not exactly sure," Pantherleap murmured, scenting the air as he lifted his muzzle upward. His ear twitched as if to try and help him figure out where it was. "Do you know?" He soon turned back to Adderheart with the question.

Adderheart scented the air, pricking his ears fiercely. He let the rest

of the world fade away into a strange, comforting blackness by closing his dark gray eyes, focusing on the scent, smell, and sounds of the world around. If he could pinpoint where it was, maybe it could make the incident go away within his mind.

It was like a stain, but it was odorless and colored. It held a sharp brightness to it and it coated his entire mind like a strange vibrant film. No matter how hard he tried to let it fade away or slice away at it with monotonically shaded claws, it stood fiercely.

However, before he could determine any direction, another one of the screeches seemed to split the air. It was louder and more prominent than before, wobbly and uncertain through the strong air. Pantherleap quickly turned to face Adderheart, who opened his eyes and pointed at in the direction with his tail.

"That way," he mewed decisively, nodding as he watched Pantherleap sprint in the direction of the noise.

He was swift to launch after the tawny tom. His features wove and dove around the trees, springing upward and down at little patches of pine needles upon the ground or branches that hung too low. Not once did Pantherleap stop, though. Instead, he continued to run and run, ears pressed tightly to his skull in order to create less of a resistance.

Adderheart did the same. On purpose... perhaps. That was debatable. But it happened anyway. His figure seemed to fall into the same patterns as Pantherleap's. Even if he didn't mind stepping on the pine needles, it didn't matter. He sprung over them, slim form easily moving up and down. Although he probably would have ducked anyway, he did so in sync with Pantherleap.

Of course, the other tom couldn't notice it. He was too far ahead and he couldn't just turn around to survey how Adderheart was doing. He'd simply trip over his paws too many times, or perhaps lose balance, which in turn would cause Adderheart to do the same, actually. His dark eyes flashed with the thought that if Pantherleap tumbled to the ground, he would too.

Though, it didn't and wouldn't happen. Pantherleap's pace was even

and his paws pounded systemically against the ground. He was a good runner, even if his figure was a little better built than Adderheart's was. His ears twitched, lightly rising, but the pale-furred tom quickly swept around a few more trees. Soon after, he made his way around a few bushes.

But the more they ran, the more an emotion rose within Adderheart's chest. He felt like they were going the wrong way. He felt like they were going in a direction that would simply allow them to go somewhere where they didn't know any sort of direction, where they had no landmarks to try and determine where they'd actually ended up...

Could he stop? Or could he get Pantherleap's attention? As he ran, Adderheart scented the air, catching a few familiar scents of cats from SageClan. They weren't too far. At least, not yet... his ear twitched fiercely once more and he stopped for a moment, huffing as he did so. He hadn't realized that he needed air, and he stood there for a few moments, huffing.

"Pantherleap!" He shouted, trying to raise his voice, though it felt like something had caused it to suddenly cut off. He cleared his throat loudly, stepping forward as he called out once more, "Pantherleap!"

The warrior, who had continued running, stopped up ahead, and he too took a break for a moment, puffing out little bits of air as he attempted to get his breathing under control. He turned around and then skimped swiftly back to Adderheart.

"What?" He asked breathlessly, shaking his head as if to clear himself of the issues with his breathing. It didn't appear to be too much of an issue, but he struggled for a bit.

"I don't think... we're going the right way," he said softly, sniffing.

"What? Then which way are we meant to go?" Pantherleap questioned, stepping around the area as he picked his way over and around random patches of pine needles. His tail flicked back and forth, nervousness clear within his features.

"I don't... know. Maybe we were imagining it. Because I don't hear it anymore," the warrior clarified quickly, looking to the tawny-furred senior warrior.

"Do cats imagine noises?" Pantherleap asked, muzzle twisting into a frown. His ear twitched fiercely back and forth.

"I don't know... maybe...?" Adderheart commented with a shrug. He watched as the warrior pounced at the base of a tree, clearly out of nervousness. Then, another sound split the air.

This time, it was fairly quiet once more. Instantly, Adderheart thought that they'd gone the wrong way because he no longer could determine what was being said. It sounded just like an apprentice's happy cheer, perhaps somewhat muffled by a clearing of trees. Though, it wasn't held back at all. The happiness and clear joy within the tone of the cat was ever present.

His ears pricked and he turned once more, swiveling around as if to try and locate the sound of the noise. Pantherleap exclaimed something unintelligibly, jerking his head quickly to the right as he narrowed his eyes in the direction of where the noise had been. A cold wind swirled around the group as if to sweep away the noise's location from their memories.

"There it is again!" Pantherleap exclaimed in a louder tone, pouncing to a random place in the clearing. "I told you, Adderheart. Come on, let's go!"

"Wait! We don't even know if it is related to the past noise! That one...was more pained, you know? This one seemed happier. At least... to me," he added swiftly, lifting a paw to draw it over his ear absently.

"Maybe the apprentices got done fighting," Pantherleap suggested, taking a few more pawsteps toward the noise's source. "Let's go!"

"Pantherleap, no!" Adderheart insisted. "We can't. I know it would've been more usual before if we had but this time it's just a happy exclamation. We can't just show up to the apprentice's mid-assessments with no explanation. We're meant to be hunting."

Patrolling? I don't remember anymore. He thought with a lash of his tail.

The tawny warrior's face twisted into a frown as he shifted on his paws. He padded over to the other tom, eyes sharpening as he faced Adderheart. "But we have to. What if something's wrong?"

"What if something *isn't* wrong?" Adderheart challenged.

"Come on, Adderheart." His voice had flattened drastically and it seemed to take on more of a Cougarstar quality to it. The words he spoke were no longer a persistence, rather a command from a steely warrior. "I know that it has to be important."

Adderheart's ears pulled tightly to his skull. As much as he wanted to say yes, he knew that the tom was probably overreacting. He was probably pulling things from his... well, the situation from the patrol. Pantherleap could've been jumping to the worst conclusion... whatever happened on the last patrol. He probably didn't want anything to happen to the apprentices.

Which likely caused his extreme worry regarding the situation, now that Adderheart considered it a bit more. Pantherleap was a wary and cautious tom in normal situations, always ensuring that no cat could see past a carefully created wall. The tawny warrior was fairly well-thought-out, too. He was *probably* applying whatever had occurred on the last patrol to this one.

Or maybe worse, he wondered absently, ears twitching.

"Come on."

The words dropped through the air as if it was a rock landing upon a flat, calm expanse of water. He looked over to Adderheart, tail flicking sharply at the clearing nearby. Ripples clearly spread across his features as the pale-furred tom gave no response.

"Adderheart?" He prompted, padding forward tentatively. Though, his strong and firm appearance did not falter.

The tom was unwilling to say the words aloud, so he turned and let his tail flicker back and forth. Silently, he shook his head and took a

few pawsteps away, muzzle wrinkling slightly. A burst of emotion lit up like a firework within Adderheart but he shoved it down. He needed to focus on leaving. Getting his point across. Not running for ages again because Pantherleap was concerned about something that didn't need it.

"What? Hello?" Pantherleap quickly skirted to stand in front of him and tipped his head brashly. "Adderheart? Come on, we have to go."

"No," he said softly, shaking his head once more as he turned around.

"You're coming with," the tom asserted, forcefully tugging on his tail with an outstretched paw. "You're coming with me, Adderheart."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are!" Pantherleap slammed a paw down, muzzle wrinkling into a frown and a small wave of sadness washed upon Adderheart. He didn't want to make Pantherleap upset. That was the last thing he wanted to do... but he also didn't want to go to investigate the noise.

"I don't want to," he mumbled once more, turning away as he pushed away another flame of emotion.

"Well, you're coming," insisted the tawny tom. "Come on, Adderheart. If you don't, then I'll... I'll..." he threatened, but his voice died off. He was clearly unable to conjure up a threat that would actually cause Adderheart to go with him.

"I'm not going, Pantherleap," Adderheart spoke, letting his voice raise slightly as he glanced over his shoulder. His tail brushed absently against the ground. "I don't want to."

"Why not?" He asked, once more tracing his path to stand in front of Adderheart.

"Stop, Pantherleap, I just want to go back. I don't want to go. I don't feel well. My head hurts." The lie slipped off his tongue easily, but it felt rough and uncomfortable in the soft, delicate air.

Pantherleap huffed. "So you only want to go back when you're in pain, huh? Won't push through it to ensure the safety of your Clanmates?"

"The safety of my Clanmates includes me," he hissed, glaring at Pantherleap. "Just let me go back, please."

"No," Pantherleap said, raising a paw to his chest. "*I* am dedicated to my Clan and *I* will ensure that you come with me to check up on the apprentices."

"You're being unreasonable!" Adderheart's voice rose once more, wavering as he shot an irritated look to the tom. "They're probably gone by now. We don't even know if that was them!"

"Head isn't in pain anymore, is it?" Pantherleap quipped, green eyes sharp.

Adderheart opened his muzzle, hurt at the words that the other tom had said. *He's just angry. Just trying to get me to agree.* He told himself sternly, hating how he instantly thought of a way to apologize. He didn't like being angry with Pantherleap.

He's... just frustrated, I guess, but I don't want him to be frustrated with me.

All of his issues with the other tawny tom melted away. Pantherleap was just frustrated, blinded by the irritation that he was experiencing. Adderheart shook his head, tail tip twitching.

"Pantherleap, I'm not going to argue with you. I don't want to go. My head does hurt, and I really just want to go back."

Pantherleap flicked his tail sharply. "Fine! I'll just go alone then." The tom whipped around and his tail fanned out, stalking off.

Adderheart felt a spark of fury at his actions but it melted almost instantly. He wanted the tom to go back with him but didn't know how to tug him back. The pale tom knew that there was almost no chance that Pantherleap would go back with a simple 'come on, Pantherleap'. It would just make it worse.

An idea popped into his head, and although he felt immediately felt guilty, he knew it had to work.

Without a word, Adderheart padded off to the edge of the clearing, and as he reached the edge, he paused. Flinching, he forced his paw to practically fold beneath his leg and a hushed exclamation fell from his jaws. That hadn't been on purpose, but he supposed it made it more believable.

Tumbling to the ground, the warrior grumbled something inaudibly and he looked over his shoulder. Pantherleap had turned around, head tipping as his figure slumped a bit.

"Are you okay?" His voice drifted tentatively across the clearing.

He gritted his teeth. "Yeah..." he forced out and stumbled forward, forcing his paw to collapse once more as he fell over, thumping against the ground with a low groan.

Pantherleap quickly skittered over, eyes dark as if he were concealing some sort of emotion. As he helped him up, his head shook back and forth rapidly. "Okay... Okay... I'm sorry. I'll help you back," he mumbled, hoisting Adderheart up. "Lean on me."

The pale-furred tom did as told, murmuring thanks to the tawny warrior, and the two cats headed back.

chapter twenty

As the two entered the camp, the sun was slowly sinking down. It wasn't that close to the horizon. Many would consider it midday still, or perhaps late afternoon. However, it didn't matter to either. Adderheart just wanted the camp to be empty when they entered. He was not going to be pestered with questions. He didn't want to be.

But, deep down, he knew it was sort of inevitable. Under the guise of a hunting patrol, the two had done nothing, and now one was slow in movements, dizzy, and appeared to be sickened to some degree...

Pantherleap paused at the entrance to the camp and he stilled, letting his paws press firmly to the ground as if to try and solidify that he would not make a sound. He glanced to Adderheart, who also stopped moving.

"What?" Adderheart prompted softly, nudging the warrior as he stepped from his side.

"Be quiet. You go in first, lay down near the edge of the camp. I'll go and catch something," Pantherleap instructed, taking a few pawsteps away.

"Wait, no, you can't do that," he hissed, keeping his voice low. "I'll get something. You'll be less likely to be yelled at if you bring no prey."

Pantherleap grunted, shaking his head with a gleam cradled in his green gaze. "Your head hurts. I can't let you hunt."

"I'm hunting," Adderheart said fiercely, dark gray eyes sparking.

"You're too proud," Pantherleap muttered, shaking his head, and after a moment, the tawny tom slipped into camp. He heard a few calls, and to his surprise, one sounded like Cougarstar's tone.

"...meeting!" The call was brash and loud, sharp and irritated.

Are the highranks meeting again? He wondered absently, head tipping as he paced lightly outside of the camp. He dared to take another step toward the camp and he let his dark gray eyes dart inside.

It was mostly empty, with Cougarstar standing near his den. He towered over Pantherleap, furiously scowling down at his brother. Even his lips were drawn back with anger as he practically shoved him into the leader's den, and a roaring rage filled Adderheart's ears. *Nobody gets to do that to Pantherleap!*

He shoved it away, telling himself it didn't matter. He whipped around, tail whisking through the air as he stalked out into the territory. He wasn't going to go that far from the camp, as he wished to just catch something nearby, but he also didn't want to stick too close in fear of being called out.

The warrior settled on a small clearing with pine needles coating the ground like a blanket. The tom made his way around, scenting the air as he tipped his head upward. He was unable to catch any scents, so he inched a bit farther out.

Trees blurred together with the sky above, yet he kept going. His head didn't actually hurt, but it had developed into a light pulsing within his stomach instead of his head. It was likely due to his hunger. He promised he'd have something when he returned to the camp, but now he was hunting.

A light hold on eating wouldn't be so bad, he supposed.

He stalked carefully around the base of a tree, his tail flickering back and forth. His ears pinned to his skull and he squinted at the ground. Had that been a scuffle? Or had he just been imagining it? With a swift movement, he dropped into a hunting crouch.

Carefully, he lay down paw after paw, ensuring that they were silent against the blanket of dark pine needles. His pale pelt was stark against the darkened forest, yet he slipped swiftly into a shadow nearby. He attempted to quell the shifting of his paws as he continued forward.

The warrior let his gaze dart to the tree nearby. It was a usual pine tree, with a few rocks at its base as if to support the large and growing tree. It wasn't growing, it was just reaching up and up with prickly branches and heavy pine needles.

His movements were controlled as ever. *I haven't even seen it yet,* he realized with a start. He stopped suddenly, ears pricking sharply as he scented the air. His ears pinned soon after and he stilled as he watched the spot where the pine needles had shifted ever so slightly.

Adderheart continued to wait, shifting upon his paws, and eventually, he grew tired of waiting and waiting. The warrior, after taking a few more steps forward, sprung for it, slamming his paws down on whatever had been there, and found there to be several shapes now squirming underneath him.

He ripped off the pine needles and found there to be three small mice, each of a size that could be easily deducted to a baby's. His eyes widened as one let out a sort of horrible, twisted squeal, and quickly he delivered each to death. Blood clouded his senses and he shook his head, licking his jaws.

The pale-furred tom eventually swept each up and buried them. Where were the parents of these tiny mice? He absently wondered how full the pile was, and if his additions would be pleasing to any of the cats who just so happened to be milling the clearing when he returned.

After a few more moments of padding carefully around, he scented the air once more, lifting his muzzle into the air. He caught the familiar smell of mouse and realized that there were two, at least, there had to have been at some point. Based on the smells, he assumed there had to be.

Eventually, he came upon a small clearing with trees alike to the first one. His ears pricked as he snuck forward, tail flickering back and forth. Soon enough, he spotted a mouse at the base of a tree, surrounded by two large, slate-colored rocks, nibbling at something clutched between two tiny paws.

At its right was another mouse, doing the exact same thing.

He carefully took a backward approach, stalking up behind the rocks in order to ensure that neither creature could see him. When he grew close enough, he eventually slammed his paw in front of both of them, leaping from up top to ensure their deaths.

And when he held both within his jaws, he licked his paws soon after, cleansing himself of the blood that now clouded his senses and his features. The pale warrior made his way back to the baby mice and found that they were still there, thankfully.

He swept them up, too, and shivered at the chilly breeze that danced by. Leaf-fall was settling in for sure, allowing the trees to wave but not to sway, say hello but not chirp... everything was dulled slightly, as if the cold was vanquishing the good within the world.

As he made his way back, it was an easy process. His ears twitched as he nimbly leaped around, taking graceful yet large strides. Eventually, he made his way back to the camp, and he glanced up to the sky. It was getting darker for sure, though there was no way that anyone would be heading to sleep for a while.

He paused at the entrance, however. Would Pantherleap even be waiting anymore? Maybe he'd been forced on a patrol. *I should've been more careful with scenting to see if he'd been out in the territory,* he thought with a sharp lash of his tail. The tom sniffed absently and he entered the camp.

Pantherleap was laying outside of the warrior's den. His tail was curled over his features carefully, as if protecting him from the sharp gazes of cats nearby. If there had been a meeting between the highranks, he seemed to have forgotten about the events that had happened.

Or maybe he'd not forgotten. Perhaps Pantherleap had blocked them from his memory and just decided to leave them as a blurry thought. It didn't seem too far off from the truth, whatever that happened to be There were a few others milling around the clearing, such as Briargaze. She was eating a mouse with Mudstripe

and Beetlepath. All three warriors were gossiping, clearly.

From the little bits and pieces of what he could understand, it was about the newest litter. Of course. Why wouldn't it be? He presumed that the news of the naming had gotten out, though he wasn't sure if cats had picked up on the true meanings of the names yet. And if not, how much longer would it be?

Would anyone confront the queen? And if so, what in StarClan's name was she meant to say? Adderheart knew that she had done it on purpose. No normal queen just named their kits in such a way... after cats who had gone against the code. Rather, Cougarstar's code.

He quickly shook himself and padded into the camp. He let his shoulders tense as he headed for the fresh-kill pile. He dropped off four of the mice, and he could feel a few gazes on his back. He suppressed a shiver and carried the final mouse off. It was one of the adults with a plump and rotund belly. It looked as though it had good meat on its bones.

However, he found himself headed for Pantherleap's way, so he simply continued walking. He sat down next to the warrior, though he figured if he gave the tawny warrior the prey, it would seem less strange for him to skirt toward him. So, he did so, lightly nudging the mouse forward, ignoring the grumbling of his belly.

Pantherleap glanced to him and took two bites before shoving the remains over to Adderheart, who finished it off in a few bites. Pantherleap shifted and sat up, yawning as he snapped his jaws closed after a moment or two had passed.

"Hunting went well?" Pantherleap prompted.

"It did," Adderheart answered, being sure to keep his voice simple and secure. "A whole family of mice. Two adults and three babies."

"Really?" Pantherleap asked, casting a look to him. He looked surprised.

"The babies were unguarded," Adderheart explained, letting his tail curl over his paws. "And the parents left a scent trail to where they

were."

"They don't seem to be that smart. I supposed that mice weren't that stupid."

"Perhaps they're weakened by the cold. I don't think they're stupid, just working a little slower... too slow."

"Perhaps. And if so, then I suppose it's a good thing for us."

"If they get too slow though, then they're sure to die," Adderheart commented. "That would not be a good thing."

Pantherleap's ear twitched. "True, though most things die in leaf-bare anyway."

"That is true."

"Do you think it'll be an early leaf-bare? Considering how the herbs... aren't doing well and the prey seems to be dwindling so early," Pantherleap murmured, letting his voice drop slightly upon the mention of herbs, "I would assume it would be."

Adderheart nodded. "I think so," he commented, "the days grow colder as do the nights, and I can't say that the prey is doing extremely well because of it."

"They seem to just be stocking up in a craze. The squirrels are going insane to make sure they get all of their little nuts collected before leaf-bare, and I think they didn't expect it, or some form of chill, this early."

Adderheart nodded in reply, and he resolved himself to simply look around the camp. The conversation seemed to shrivel up almost as soon as it had started, and really, he didn't mind. It wasn't an awkward closing to the fairly normal and pleasant interaction.

At least, not in his opinion. He thought it had been a good interaction, one with a back-and-forth stride to it, like he had been padding alongside Pantherleap. Each had stepped in turn with the other, causing the ground to smooth and the rivers to run calmly. Everything seemed fine.

What if Pantherleap didn't think the same? What if, to the other warrior, it had been a twisting, darkened path and he had been chucked out to walk it alone? Perhaps his words had been shriveled and dead. Maybe they'd been the withering plants on the edges of the crooked path that the tawny tom headed down.

He shifted as if a million bugs had suddenly crawled all over his pelt. It felt as though he was being infected by some sort of strange feeling. It was like nervousness but not the same kind of nervousness he experienced on occasion.

The feeling could not be tied to any other emotion. It was new and fresh. Well, not completely new. He knew of it from previous experience, and he realized with a slight jolt that the past experiences had been with Pantherleap, too. His ear flicked sharply and he blinked a few times.

He shoved it away, not wanting to experience it anymore. It was strange and foreign. Mostly. And once more and he fell back into the usual track of thoughts.

For the rest of the camp, things continued on as usual, even if Adderheart didn't notice it. Pantherleap still sat, looking around with a simple gaze. Cougarstar was presumably within his den, probably grumbling about something stupid that he could control easily.

Mudstripe had left and headed for the warriors' den, leaving Beetlepath and Briargaze to continue their gossip. It continued to grow darker and darker. The blanket of black and gloom within the sky was slowly reaching its way toward the horizon.

With clawing motions, it slowly took control of the lightness within the sky. Dusk was falling, soon to transition into a pleasant twilight. Most cats seemed to filter into the camp by now. Galewind and Runningfoot trotted in, carrying a mouse between them both.

Poppyfur and Russetpelt headed in next. Neither carried any prey, and it could easily be assumed that it was not a hunting patrol. Instead, perhaps they had gone to patrol the borders, check out the rogues... anything, really. But most patrols didn't exactly take two

cats.

So what could they've done? Nobody really seemed to care. Poppyfur practically pranced toward the fresh-kill pile, plucking the mouse from Galewind and Runningfoot off the pile. Russetpelt, apparently, was skipping a nightly meal, as the warrior immediately turned and headed off to the warriors den.

The elders den was as empty as ever, whereas the nursery seemed to be populated. However, it was clear that the only adult cat inside was Willowdapple. The controversially named kits were also inside. Who knew if they had received criticism? Or if Willowdapple had?

And really, if not, how long? She was bound to get into some sort of confrontation soon. Some warrior who felt as if they were super strong and intelligent was bound to go up to her and snarl at her for naming her kits in the way that she had. What was she meant to say?

None of the apprentices were back just yet. Well, actually...

Adderheart jerked back into noticing the world around him and he spotted Bumblepaw, Swallowpaw, Birchpaw, and Finchpaw. Their mentors padded in behind them, and none of them seemed to be too emotional. Or at least, they didn't show any emotion.

Finchpaw padded in first, pawsteps easy and moving in a usual manner. Her eyes were surprisingly simple, tail flickering back and forth as she took no notice of anyone around her. She just headed straight for the apprentice's den, not pausing once.

Bumblepaw and Swallowpaw came sprinting in at once. The latter swerved toward the pile and swatted a mouse from it. The apprentice quickly grabbed it and dashed after Bumblepaw, who was headed for the apprentice's den, too. They both disappeared into the den.

Birchpaw headed in last. The apprentice didn't seem happy. Instead, he seemed to be miserable, but not the kind that came from losing or failing. Rather, he seemed to be upset because things had simply gone the way that had been unexpected for him.

He went to the apprentice's den, too. His tail dragged against the ground, and his head hung as he stared at his paws. He dragged them across the ground, too. He didn't stop to say hello, just as the other three had, but nobody stopped him, either. The tom simply entered the den without any other differences within his appearance.

Adderheart wanted to know what had occurred, but he couldn't. Only Cougarstar could. But he couldn't.

He wasn't allowed.

chapter twenty one

Over the horizon rose a pleasant morning sun. It spread lovely light across the SageClan camp, and it happened to wake up a few members. One was Palewhisker, who despised getting up so early that the camp was mostly empty, but there was nothing he could do. Another was Bearpatch, who also clearly disliked getting up early, but he'd never say anything about it.

Adderheart also woke fairly early. He picked his way through the warrior's den, having eventually gone there the night before to sleep. Pantherleap had, too, and the two actually managed to sleep fairly close to each other. If he was being honest, he thought it was comforting. Pantherleap's fur was smooth and soft compared to some of the other warriors'.

The pale tom exited the warrior's den and spotted the two highranks as well as Birchpaw. The apprentice was seated at the corner of the camp, tail curled curtly around two shaking paws. Adderheart averted his deep gray eyes and instead looked to the fresh-kill pile. He didn't want to stare at the apprentice, as he seemed uncomfortable as it was.

He glanced to Palewhisker. The deputy swept his tail across the ground as if to indicate that he should approach. And so he did. Adderheart padded forward with a light ear twitch forming, head tipping soon after as he studied Palewhisker. Soon enough, a small patrol had gathered. Shrewclaw and Brindlebreeze padded up behind Adderheart, and Birchpaw tagged along.

"We will go on patrol near the border to ensure the rogues have gone," Palewhisker announced. However, he paused upon seeing Pantherleap approaching. The tawny tom stood tall, fur groomed to perfection.

"I'd like to come," he commented in a simple tone.

"Birchpaw, dismissed," the deputy instructed, and the apprentice's

tail whisked upon the ground as if in frustration. The patched tom spun on his paw and stalked off.

What possibly *could have happened on their mid-assessment yesterday?*

Adderheart shoved the thought from his mind. Maybe he could ask Finchpaw later. For now, however, he had to deal with this patrol. He didn't exactly want to go but he didn't want to sit around camp doing nothing, either. He shook his head. Why wouldn't he go? This was more evidence of the rogues if anything. It wasn't *just* a patrol.

Pantherleap's tail swept against the ground. "Where are we going?"

"To the border to figure out if the rogues have left," Palewhisker replied, rising to his paws. "Follow me, and don't run."

The group filed into a line behind the warrior, with Pantherleap taking up the back and Adderheart in front of him. Brindlebreeze shuffled quickly behind Palewhisker, and Shrewclaw stood in the middle. The group began to walk yet it was more like a march. Nobody spoke as they headed past spruce trees. Nobody spoke as the sun slanted into their eyes.

Everyone simultaneously jumped over small rocks and fallen logs. Everyone walked at the same pace with the same stride. Everyone was sure to look forward, eyes darting around as if to see if there were anything around. However, Adderheart had noted the smells of prey nearby, yet no cat had actually stopped to catch it.

There wasn't much he could do to fix that, so he just kept walking.

Eventually, they came upon the border, and immediately Palewhisker reared back, tail raising in a warning. His lips drew back and the line instantly dissipated. Brindlebreeze stumbled back and Pantherleap approached carefully. Adderheart was quick to follow in silence. Was something wrong?

Shrewclaw sprinted forward and a loud yowl split the air.

What is going on—?!

Out of the bushes tumbled a leopard-spotted she-cat. She was

mesmerizing, really. Her bluish-purple eyes were bright with rage and her hooked claws dug ferociously into Shrewclaw's pelt. He roared in agony, thrashing in her grip, and Pantherleap launched forward.

However, he was met with a thin white-and-black patched tom who sprinted out from the bushes. Palewhisker watched, mouth dropping open and Brindlebreeze, who had stumbled further back out of fear and terror, was tackled by a tortoiseshell.

Adderheart watched as a sandy spotted she-cat sprung out from the bushes and instantly pinned Palewhisker to the ground. He unsheathed his claws and shredded them against the rogue's stomach, who screamed and rolled off. Adderheart shook his head fiercely. He had to fight.

Fight?

He unsheathed his claws and dug them into the ground. He studied each cat and with a swift movement, he launched toward the leopard-like she-cat. The pale tom let his claws dig into her pelt and he pulled, chunks of her fur coming off her figure. She screeched, rolling off Shrewclaw, who struggled to his paws.

Adderheart snarled, lips drawing back as he launched forward. However, a paw slammed on his tail and he yowled out in pain. Twisting around, he spotted the tortoiseshell from before. Brindlebreeze lay still on the ground. Blood roared in his ears and blocked out the noise of the screams.

The sandy she-cat had caught her claws upon his tail. She yanked backward and Adderheart could do nothing but scramble upon the ground, trying to hook his claws into the ground. His fur puffed up and he tried to rise to his paws, but the she-cat only tugged harder and he found himself being dragged right across the ground toward her jaws.

He could sense that she was closing in. Perhaps she was bunching up her back legs to spring forward onto him, or maybe she was just waiting until she pulled him close enough to bite down. He didn't know. But he did know that he had to get away, and he had to get

away *now*.

Adderheart twisted, trying to free himself once more, but her grip was tight. He watched as the leopard-spotted she-cat charged Shrewclaw, and the black-and-white tom was still battling Pantherleap. He suddenly realized that the tortoiseshell she-cat was gone.

And apparently, so did the leopard she-cat.

"Where's Irena?!" Her voice was delicate like silk, yet it was deep and smooth like a river.

"Shut it and fight, Nova," hissed the sandy she-cat, who pressed a paw down on Adderheart's shoulder. He stifled a screech and tightened his figure, attempting to ensure he didn't go slack.

"Sand, what if she—" The leopard-spotted she-cat, apparently named Nova, clearly spoke to the sandy she-cat.

Irena is the tortoiseshell. Sand is the sandy one. Nova is leopard-spotted. Who is the black-and-white tom?

Sand growled, hissing something inaudibly as she called harshly, "Aelous, get over here and deal with this tom."

"M-my name is Adderheart!" He shouted as best he could. The weight atop him quickly shifted from a slim she-cat to an equally slim tom.

"Yeah yeah, and mine's Aelous," he snapped. "Do you want to get this over with?"

Adderheart stopped a shiver from running down his spine and he surveyed the battle around. He had to get out of this somehow. Shrewclaw had managed to pin Nova to the ground, and he was shredding her stomach mercilessly. However, the she-cat was fighting back effectively.

Pantherleap had taken the swapping of aggressors well. He'd sprung backward and away, into the bushes, leaving Sand to glare around the clearing. However, Palewhisker sprinted out from nearby, as he

had taken the whirling and quick-moving battle as a way to disguise his way out.

The deputy rammed straight into Sand, who screeched in surprise. The tom slammed a paw down on her head and she slipped out of the way, ripping her claws across his belly. He sprung up and rolled out of the way. Aelous, at the lack of response, growled and lifted a paw, preparing to slam it down on Adderheart's head.

Where is Pantherleap? Where is he? Does nobody care?

Of course not. It's SageClan.

A spark of fury lit him up and seemed to fuel him. He pushed up on the weakened grip of Aelous, but he let out a snarl and simply pressed down harder. Adderheart thrashed, tail thumping against the ground, but the black-and-white tom simply rolled his eyes. Pain flooded him, and he could no longer ignore the crimson liquid seeping into his pelt.

Pantherleap was still nowhere to be seen, and Palewhisker and Shrewclaw had taken a back-to-back approach in fighting. Both toms rose upon their back legs, swiping with their claws at their aggressors. Brindlebreeze was assumedly still on the ground. Bleeding. Suffering. Irena was gone.

Aelous lifted a paw with claws poking out from the edges. He smiled politely down at Adderheart, murmuring something that he couldn't hear. But he knew the intent. He was done for. Because his stupid Clanmates couldn't see past their selfishness. Because Pantherleap disappeared.

The black-and-white rogue began to bring it down upon Adderheart's now slack figure, but instead, he swapped tactics and dove in with large jaws, opened wide and already coated with blood.

But he would never complete the action, for Pantherleap barreled into his side, sinking his claws into the other tom's neck.

He roared in fury, though the noise was cut off abruptly, a strange

sort of sputtering emerging from his throat as he attempted to throw Pantherleap off. Adderheart whirled upward, springing out into the clearing, his claws unsheathing.

His ears pinned. A tugging within his heart said that he had to help Pantherleap, but he knew he had other duties. The pale warrior kept his head tipped upward and away from Pantherleap. He didn't watch to watch. He had to listen to the warrior's cries mixed with the general horrifying screeches in the clearing.

He sprung for Sand, swiping unsheathed claws at the she-cat's legs. She, unprepared, reared back, but it didn't do anything. He managed to get a few good scores of his claws across her back legs, and she screamed. He could only imagine her pain as she stumbled back and toppled over.

Swiftly, Adderheart launched for her. He snapped his jaws at her, yet she managed to catch his tail by her claws. Pain flooded him and he jerked back, sinking his back claws into her belly. She screeched, letting go, and he hopped backward. Blood roared in his ears, almost as loud as the cries from the clearing.

His ears pinned to his skull as he hurriedly whipped around. He wasn't about to get into another fight with Sand, for then he'd surely be doomed because the cat who'd saved him was busy with another rogue.

Unfortunately, he caught sight of that other cat that'd helped him. The tawny tom was grappling with Aelous, claws gripping the black-and-white tom's shoulders. Against his best wishes, Adderheart sprung forward and sunk his teeth into Aelous' backpaw. The rogue roared, whipping back.

And then, just then, and only then did a harsh yowl break the strange crowded loudness of the clearing.

"Retreat!"

At first, he wasn't sure who it was from, as the voice had almost blended right into the odd noisiness of the rest of the battle. Had it been Palewhisker's call or Sand's? The she-cat appeared to be the

one dictating what was going on on the rogue's side, anyway.

"And someone find Irena!"

Well, that cleared it up.

Nova, the leopard-like she-cat, turned tail, but not before growling fiercely at the SageClanners. Aelous simply whipped around and sprinted off, whereas Sand stalked off, her tail flickering furiously against the ground.

And all at once, it seemed as though the battle had been a small fluke. Something that had been a mistake, never to be mentioned again. But it couldn't be. Brindlebreeze flashed into Adderheart's mind and he looked around the clearing, not spotting the she-cat.

Really, he expected her to be dead. He assumed that everyone else thought the same. While they kept on fighting, it was likely that Irena had shredded the warrior's figure instead of getting into the fight more. Palewhisker roughly shoved himself to his paws and seemed to shake off a layer of blood.

The entire clearing was splattered in the crimson liquid. It coated the trees and the grass dripped with it. Chunks of fur littered the ground, making it quite the sight to see for any passerby. But there was no passerby. Only the injured stayed in the clearing.

As he padded around, Palewhisker suddenly pulled himself to a stop. His ears pricked harshly and his eyes traveled the clearing.

"Found her."

The voice was like some strange rock splitting through calm waters. But the waters weren't really calm. The waters were just content, rather collected, still only through fear perhaps. Adderheart wasn't too sure, but he approached Palewhisker regardless.

From the corner of his gaze pricked Pantherleap's figure.

He was bleeding from several gashes upon his flanks, and his paws were battered with little scratches. Adderheart almost thought he looked vivacious... standing there, his head tipped slightly into the

air, tail shot into the air, flickering back and forth as he looked around. Despite the blood that clogged his fur, he was still standing and seemed not to sit or collapse in on himself as he padded forward.

Shrewclaw had a lengthy cut across his foreleg as well as a couple of other extra injuries. Palewhisker was bleeding rather heavily as well, from a few main wounds upon his back and belly. Adderheart looked down at his own figure and cringed.

He, also, was bleeding from a few main scratches, and his tail hung limply upon the ground as he padded along. He could still feel it, as pain pulsed from it, but it wasn't all too bad. Adrenaline made everything feel sort of like a blurry shot of agony.

"Is she alive?"

Pantherleap's voice slit the clearing. It was strong, surprisingly, like the stony wall of a castle. Even through all the fighting it still rose tall. Adderheart pushed down a blossoming of emotion.

"I don't know," Palewhisker answered, approaching the she-cat once more. Adderheart tried not to vomit at the sight of her.

Her figure was shredded and it was unlikely she'd ever have much fur again if she were to live. Brindlebreeze's head laid on the ground, her eyes open, and in their sharp yellow depths seemed to swarm terror and horror alike. She had passed out, clearly. No cat could live through that amount of pain.

It didn't seem as though Irena had slashed her pelt or her figure at all. It just seemed as though the original cuts and gashes from the fight had been amplified as she lay there limply. Blood was spattered all over her white, brown, and black patched figure.

"She's breathing," Palewhisker suddenly realized, and instantly he hoisted the she-cat up, struggling to get the still-bleeding warrior onto his figure.

"If we stop her bleeding now, then she'll be less likely to die at camp," Shrewclaw interrupted, stepping up to stand in front of the

deputy.

"She's going to die," Palewhisker said bluntly, and Adderheart flinched. He attempted to cover it up by shifting his position momentarily, shuffling from paw to paw as his ear flicked fiercely.

"Herbs can heal her," Shrewclaw insisted, tail flickering against the ground.

"Herbs can't heal this," Palewhisker growled, turning away.

"He's right," Pantherleap spoke, "if we try to treat her more now, then she'll be more likely to live later on."

"Okay, geniuses, so where do you presume to find herbs?" Palewhisker snapped. "I want to go back to camp and I'm sure that Pantherleap'll collapse soon if he doesn't get treated."

Pantherleap scoffed and shook his head fiercely. "I won't." Palewhisker shot him a 'sure you won't' look.

"Just apply pressure," Adderheart muttered. "Get some moss and wrap it around the worst parts."

"We don't have time for this," Palewhisker asserted, shuffling the she-cat onto his shoulders more prominently.

"If you let us then we do," Pantherleap replied, though his voice was even and steady. He almost appeared noble, standing up to Palewhisker with a usual and paced tone.

Palewhisker opened his jaws and on the inside, Adderheart saw a brief flash of pearly whites coated in crimson liquid. He seemed to quickly snap them shut and the deputy whipped around, instantly padding off and away. Adderheart's shoulders slumped yet neither other warrior seemed to do the same.

Was that a mistake?

Fear flashed within him and he feigned a small fall, placing a paw forward before it lifted far too early and he tripped momentarily. The pale warrior faked a small grumble and he lifted a paw to his

head as if attempting to soothe a nonexistent headache.

Pantherleap looked to him and Shrewclaw headed off after the deputy. The tawny senior warrior murmured something that he couldn't hear and simply turned and padded off.

Adderheart followed, his tail dragging miserably against the ground. He knew that SageClan had won the fight, the skirmish, the battle— rather just the mishap. It was a mistake. Brindlebreeze was horrifically injured and he was sure his Clanmates had some scars to last a while.

How come this feels like a loss when we won?

chapter twenty two

Adderheart dreaded the moment that the group would pad into the camp. He wanted to stay within the soft light of the afternoon forever. He didn't want to see the prying eyes and he didn't want to hear the million questions. He didn't want to see the lack of concern on cats' faces and he didn't want to hear the gossip spread like wildfire across a dry forest. He didn't want to.

But Palewhisker stumbled in first, leaving Shrewclaw to follow. Pantherleap sent a look to Adderheart and he pressed a paw firmly to the ground, swallowing anxiously. He didn't like it. He wanted to just stick right by Pantherleap's side the entire side. Perhaps they could head to the healer's den together and ignore everyone else crowding around.

However, Pantherleap just padded in with a light stagger to his step, and that left Adderheart to head in after.

The camp was mostly empty. To his surprise, Willowdapple was lazing near the nursery, her tail curled protectively over her belly. However, Adderheart couldn't see any bundles of fur at her stomach, and so he assumed that she had just taken a break from caring for them. At seeing the bloodied patrol though, particularly at seeing Adderheart, she quickly shifted back into the den.

Although, Galewind sat near the fresh-kill pile. And of course, at seeing his sister's bloodied form, he sprung to his paws and cried out her name. The warrior whipped and sprinted toward Cougarstar's den. Little did he know that he had alarmed the entire camp of what had occurred, and now the floodgates of cats had been opened.

Finchpaw's head poked out from the apprentice's den and she recoiled, immediately heading back into the den. Birchpaw nearly vomited but he too turned away, whereas their mentors rushed out and immediately began bombarding them with questions. Birdwish, who was previously Palewhisker's apprentice, sprinted out and

gasped at the sight.

Marigoldcry also headed out of the warrior's den, and she too gasped, but she spun on her paw and simply whipped back around. The pale-furred warrior stumbled as Cougarstar exited his den. The leader's green gaze was guarded heavily, darting around from cat-to-cat within the clearing, and his tawny tail flickered against the ground.

The clearing was quiet, except for the soft gasps and shocked noises from onlookers.

He looked to Birdwish. "Get the healers," he ordered before turning back to the group. He surveyed them with a critical gaze.

Palewhisker stood tall. The leader and deputy seemed to be at a silent standoff, for the latter's figure was covered in blood and the former's clean and crisp. However, Cougarstar let his head dip lightly to the deputy, who in turn lifted his muzzle as he let the blood-soaked figure of Brindlebreeze slide straight off his back.

"She's not dead."

"Get the healers!"

And suddenly, the noise flooded in.

The cats began to scream and shout at the prospect of losing a warrior to battle. They'd hardly ever lost *anyone* to battle. Patrols were rather large as they were, but the rogues seemed to be growing in numbers. It'd never happened before and everyone was beginning to panic. It hadn't been bad last battle. But now it was bad again. A few younger warriors darted back into the warrior's den.

"We need bigger patrols!"

"Was this the rogues again?!"

"Yes!"

"StarClan curse them!"

"Is that Brindlebreeze?"

"I can barely recognize her!"

"How did she get so injured?!"

"I thought Pantherleap was a skilled fighter..."

The words sent a chill of fury down his spine and his bloodied fur puffed up, eyes narrowing as he glared absently around the clearing. *Pantherleap saved me!* He wanted to scream in every single one of their faces. *Without him, I'd be totally dead and gone and Brindlebreeze might still be alive! Give him some credit, you fox-hearts!*

Of course, the chatter about the skill of the fighters didn't stop at all. They kept on going on and on about the different logistics of the battle, wondering who was on the rogues' side, wondering what could've been done differently, asking who had done the most damage... everything *logistical.* What about the fact that their Clanmate was practically dying, another couple heavily injured?

He probably wasn't going to say anything, but if he were to have, it wouldn't do anything. Cougarstar's sharp yell rose above the crowd as the healers dashed out of the den.

"Marigoldcry! Birdwish! Freckletuft! Fernfall! Dustshade! Streamfang!" He called out each cat's name and they, in turn, stepped up to stand in front of him. Coalbelly wormed her way through the crowd and the dark-furred healer quickly took Brindlebreeze's figure and headed off to the healer's den.

"What?" Birdwish prompted, and Adderheart couldn't help but detect a note of anxiousness within her voice.

"Patrol, all of you. Fernfall, you lead, Freckletuft, bring up the back, and follow the scent trail..." He paused momentarily, sweeping his green eyes over the patrol before looking decisively at one. "Shrewclaw, you get healed up quick, Twilightcloud! Heal Shrewclaw over here! He's going on another patrol!"

The named she-cat rushed out, instantly plastering the pale brown tom with tons of herbs. Cobwebs, some yellowy flower that barely

even looked like a flower, a darker greenish leaf... all of it was chewed or mushed somehow and it was pressed into wounds.

"Don't be too harsh on yourself," Twilightcloud's murmur drifted across the clearing on a cold and swift breeze. The warrior's eyes narrowed at her and she blinked simply back at him. Shrewclaw turned, his figure seeming to creak as he swiftly trotted after the group, who had already headed off into the territory.

Twilightcloud next moved onto Palewhisker as Cougarstar shouted, "Shrewclaw, lead them to where it was, report back when you're done!"

Palewhisker was as equally herbed-up, with his figure now coated in what seemed to be a layer of cobwebs, and underneath were similar herbs to Shrewclaw's. *At least fairness is in the healing world.*

"Pantherleap, Adderheart!"

That was Coalbelly's voice, echoing from the healer's den.

"What is it?" Twilightcloud called back.

"Get them in here!"

The cats had pressed around tighter as the moments had continued, and Palewhisker had left to rest within his den. Apparently, he found no need to be within the healer's den, despite the fact that it probably would allow him to heal quicker. He simply just pivoted on his paw and headed for his den.

As the crowd seemed to grow louder, Adderheart's ears pinned and he turned, watching as Twilightcloud sprinted forward, her tail waving behind her like a flag. She quickly huddled them up and then began to guide them away.

Adderheart and Pantherleap were ushered off to the healer's den, and the two were given a small offshoot to share. According to Twilightcloud, there was no use in separating the two, as their injuries were essentially the same. She claimed that it would be easier to treat them.

Adderheart wasn't complaining. He'd rather be with some cat than be alone. And, to him, it was just a lovely little addition that the cat happened to be Pantherleap.

The pale tom settled down in a half made nest. A couple of sticks and moss made it up, all tangled together in some form of a nest. Pantherleap's, next to him, appeared similar. Adderheart shifted, feeling a thorn stabbing him in the side. It reignited the fire of his wounds and he laid his head miserably on his paws.

Everything hurts.

"Hey," Pantherleap whispered, prodding him gently. "You can't fall asleep, we've not even been treated yet."

Adderheart lifted his head and glanced to Pantherleap. He looked shining and suave in the near lightless den, his green eyes sparkling as they trained upon his pale fur. Adderheart pushed down a blossoming within him and he shrugged.

"I'm tired."

"Yeah, well, Shrewclaw had to go on another patrol," he commented softly. "I think you're doing rather well."

"What, resting next to you while bleeding out?"

Pantherleap snickered, lifting a paw to prod at him once more. "Just wait. They're probably focusing on Brindlebreeze."

The two waited around for a while before a dark shape swept into the den. Twilightcloud had herbs stuffed into her muzzle as she looked to both cats, and her eyes narrowed momentarily. Adderheart shifted as if to get away from the tawny tom, noting that the two had drifted closer together.

Milkfrost and—

He blinked fiercely, shoving the thought away. He kept thinking of them. The two she-cats who broke the code that Cougarstar had set in place that nobody understood but that nobody had really taken time to consider. His ears flickered and pinned, swallowing

anxiously. He wanted to forget them.

Nobody else in the Clan was like them, so how come he kept thinking about them?

A small thread of doubt from the earlier moons rose within his mind once more, multi-colored and brightly shimmering against the gray and white background. He dyed it gray and then shoved it away, tipping his muzzle away from Pantherleap.

He jumped a bit as some sort of cooling herb was spread across his wounds, and Twilightcloud paused, studying him for a bit. He stilled, blinking calmly as she treated his gashes. Finally, she moved onto Pantherleap, and the pale tom glanced away, blinking a few times as he focused on the den's wall.

The den went silent as the healer left. His wounds felt strange, as if someone had poured all sorts of concrete across his figure. He felt stuck in place and his body was like a welded piece of glass. Never to move from its original shape. He shifted once more, noting that Pantherleap inched back to lay closer to him.

Adderheart did the same, fur prickling. The breathing of the tawny tom filled the den, soft and quiet. It was lulling and calming, pleasantly whisking around on top of cold breezes from outside of the den. The leader's brother sighed momentarily and laid his head on his paws.

The silence was broken by a sharp voice of a healer.

"She's horribly injured."

"I know."

"It's not something we can fix."

"...I know."

It was the two healers, of course. Coalbelly had spoken first, voice soft. The she-cat seemed to be somewhat concerned, but not about the injured she-cat, who of course was Brindlebreeze. It was assumed that the older healer had attempted to assist the warrior,

and then maybe called in the younger for help.

"How's Brindlebreeze?"

The new tone that entered the den was sharp, creating an awkward tonal shift within the area. The voice seemed to belong to a strong tom, and immediately, Adderheart knew it was Cougarstar. Palewhisker was in his den and Bearpatch just wasn't around. Absently, he wondered where the heir was... if he was out of camp, would he be punished for not being around?

No, of course not. Cougarstar couldn't care less if anyone had even shown up when we returned.

"Not... well," Coalbelly replied. "Her injuries aren't as fix-able as I thought."

"Well, unfortunate. She'll probably be dead then?"

What?

His tone was horrifically blunt. Adderheart wasn't sure if there was a note of rudeness within it, but he did catch its sharpness. He looked to Pantherleap, whose ears were perked tall as if to catch every little bit of the interaction. It went silent within the den for a moment before a reply emerged.

"Well..." Coalbelly started. "I was thinking we'd put her down. You know, give her some deathberries."

"Oh, sure," replied Cougarstar. "Herbs are low, then?"

"Yes," answered Twilightcloud, adding somewhat nervously, "I don't know if we have any deathberries."

There was a shuffling sound that filled the den and in the pause, Adderheart looked to Pantherleap with a shocked the expression. They were going to kill her...? The patrol had brought her back to be helped, not be killed! The poor warrior had fought for her Clan, only to be killed by it... this was almost worse than being killed by the rogues.

"We do," Coalbelly's reply sounded. It held no emotion. "A couple, though there's enough to kill her."

"Put her down," Twilightcloud corrected.

Cougarstar scoffed, "Doesn't matter. Same thing. And besides, she'll die anyway."

"We can try to heal her," Twilightcloud said.

"No. There aren't enough herbs, and Adderheart, Palewhisker, Shrewclaw, and Pantherleap have more value to the Clan than she does. Two are important to the ranks, and the others are overall excellently trained and good warriors," Coalbelly replied. Adderheart's maw dropped open once more and he looked to Pantherleap, who had cast his green eyes away.

"Exactly, so just kill her," Cougarstar voiced his agreement.

His fur prickled uncomfortably and he had no doubt that Pantherleap felt worse. Their worths were being determined just like that... he didn't like it. But he couldn't help but feel a bright spark of relief, and as much as he wanted it to go away, it felt *good*. And that felt bad. And scary.

He was useful to the Clan. He was excellently trained. He was a good warrior.

And Cougarstar agreed. How? What? It had to be a lie, right? The leader wouldn't ever agree to him being a good warrior... but he did want Brindlebreeze to die. *So he's lying to get his way.* It was the only way and really, it didn't seem all that far off. The leader did anything to get his way, so obviously he'd just lie alongside Coalbelly.

But would Coalbelly be telling the truth? Did she think he was a good warrior? Probably... but they likely discussed him during the meetings. They had those even more regularly than he'd originally supposed and now that he considered it, there seemed to be a lot of arguing. During every single meeting, shouts and screams seemed to echo from the den.

He shivered. There was no way that was healthy for any of them but they didn't seem to stop. Perhaps it became sort of an addiction in a way. It helped Cougarstar feel in control of what was going on. He always seemed to be grasping for it, anyway, with outstretched paws with claws poking from his tawny features.

"Fine," Twilightcloud muttered. Her voice was nearly completely gone. It was as if some sort of demon had come and taken her voice and her confidence, apparently.

A fierce poke caused Adderheart to look to the side, spotting a distressed Pantherleap. The tawny warrior's fur was puffed up and his green gaze was sharp and nervous. His paw slammed against the ground, a frown twisting its way onto his face.

"We can't allow this to happen!" He hissed furiously.

"I know..." Adderheart whispered, shaking his head. He wanted to help and he wanted to help Pantherleap help, too. "But we can't. We'd be killed after she was."

"That's not fair!" Pantherleap exclaimed. Adderheart whisked his tail sharply against the tom's muzzle and his heart jumped into his throat. His fur prickled and he shoved the emotion down.

"It isn't, but we can't do anything about it."

Pantherleap huffed something irritably and turned away, seeming as though he was preparing to stand.

Adderheart sprung up, wrapping his tail tightly around Pantherleap, and both toms stilled. A chill ran down his spine and Pantherleap murmured something softly. It was pleasant and stirred in Adderheart's mind, but he hadn't caught exactly what the warrior had said, but it didn't matter. The tawny tom pressed against him momentarily and his heart stopped.

He didn't move, and neither did Pantherleap.

Stop! Stop!

A string of expletives filled his mind and his ears pinned to his skull

rather swiftly. He untangled himself and pressed himself into the nest, hating the way all sorts of emotions clambered up to swirl inside of him. A wave of an emotion he truly hated was strong as it clamped around his muzzle. Pantherleap looked embarrassed, and Adderheart whispered something to him.

"It's okay."

Pantherleap dipped his head silently, pressing his figure closer to the ground. His ears pinned tightly to his skull and he shifted uncomfortably, fur puffing at his actions. He buried his head in his paws and Adderheart lightly tapped the tom on the shoulder.

"I said it's okay. You're fine," he whispered once more. The tawny warrior turned away.

He was going to say more, but the sound of choking filled the den.

It was from Brindlebreeze. The noise was awful and suffocating the senses of the cats within the den, and no matter how much one wished to ignore it, the sound was just too loud to push away. The she-cat probably had no idea what was going on... simply, she was just suffering silently, trying to speak and scream something out, but all she could do was struggle to breathe.

And then, after a moment or two more, the den went silent. The choking stopped, but it wasn't a slow stop like how it would've been expected. It was a swift and sharp stop, and Adderheart heard a whisking of claws. A horrible chill ran down his spine and he looked away. He didn't want to see Pantherleap and he didn't want to hear the blood flowing from the she-cat's neck.

He pressed his head into his paws and ignored the world.

chapter twenty three

His pelt felt like plaster when he woke up.

He jolted awake, eyes immediately flickering open as he swept his dark gray eyes around. His gaze caught on Pantherleap and Adderheart quickly inched away from the tawny tom. He, asleep, shifted momentarily, his muzzle dropping as if he were to say something, though only a soft murmur came out, and no words were recognizable.

Adderheart licked his paw and anxiously drew it over his ear. Everything was going crazy. Pantherleap was... he... The tom shook his head fiercely, flattening his ears as he looked around the den. He stood and it felt as though his very bones were creaking. He shook out his pale creamy fur and carefully picked his way to the exit of the den.

He slipped past a small darkened patch of dirt upon the ground and he shivered. It had to have been Brindlebreeze. The senior warrior continued along until he exited and came upon a dark and starry night.

Generally, he'd not expected it to be nighttime. He had thought it was going to be dawn, but he supposed that sometimes injuries messed up his sleeping times. It wasn't the dead of night, but it wasn't nearly dawn, either. He gazed around the camp, noting that the shadows jumped around as he padded forward. The tom swerved and headed for the fresh-kill pile.

However, he pulled himself to a sharp stop.

There were only two pieces of prey in the pile and both were mice. One had tawny-ish fur and a strong figure, and the other had a pale creamish-brown pelt on its slim and sleek figure. The creamy one was facing away from the tawny one, but its little paws were twisted as if it wanted to go back. The tawny mouse was unnaturally elongated, but it was clearly split between being alone

or being with the cream one.

As he approached, the cream one's eyes seemed to spark at him. There seemed to be fury within the mouse's black, beady depths, and he leveled its stare. His lip curled absently but he turned back to the tawny one, noting that it had twisted *further* away from the pale one now that he had arrived. He glanced to his paws and found them to be a different color — tawny. They were broad and tawny... and there was blood spattered on it.

He blinked fiercely and everything faded away. As he looked around, the stars seemed to gleam brighter than ever. The senior warrior hurriedly plucked both pieces of prey and quickly padded back into the healer's den. The moon within the dark and mystical sky of the night stared down at him as he slipped away into the shadows once more, and the stars twinkled politely as they studied his actions.

Adderheart didn't want to think about it. There had been meaning behind that. There had to have been, right? *Cats just don't have random patches of where their fur turns color.* He looked down to his paw. It was normal once more, taking its usual pale creamy-brown tone, and it wasn't as broad or as hefty as it had once been. And, obviously, it was no longer bloodied.

Suppressing a shiver, the pale-furred tom wove carefully through the healer's den. He wasn't about to wake up anyone else sleeping within the den because he'd been startled about some weird prey issue. After managing to locate his and Pantherleap's location, the tom quietly padded in. He ensured his pawsteps were soft and gentle against the ground.

However, the tawny warrior woke anyway. His head perked up, ears twitching and head tipping as he looked to Adderheart. His eyes sparked momentarily at the prey that dangled from his jaws and then the senior warrior shifted, seeming to press a paw down onto the ground. He swallowed noticeably and then waved his tail in a hello.

"Hi," Adderheart whispered, laying one of the mice down in front of the tawny-furred tom. "Nice to see you awake."

"...right. Thanks."

He took a bite of it, chewing. Pantherleap said nothing else, instead tipped his head *down* as if to avoid him. Adderheart's ears twitched nervously though he settled down nearby, wrapping his tail tightly around his figure. He felt drowsy in the warmth of the den. As he took a bite of the mouse beneath him, he realized that was only further going to fuel his exhaustion.

Settling his chin upon his paws, he let his figure relax. The soft, comforting warmth of the healer's den surrounded him like a blanket would a child. Adderheart took another bite of the mouse and gently let his tail curl further around him, but more in a relaxed manner. He smiled momentarily to himself before a question split the softness of the air.

"What're you smiling at?" Pantherleap asked, lightly nudging Adderheart with a paw.

"The prey," he lied, and as soon as it slipped off his tongue he regretted it. "It's nice. It's not too fresh but it's nice."

"Oh."

An awkward silence settled upon the heated air within the den and Adderheart shifted uncomfortably. Pantherleap lifted a paw and absently drew it over his ear, a small flickering noise filling the air as the leader's brother did the action repeatedly. Adderheart's dark gray gaze darted to his paws to a random place within the den.

"How're your injuries?" Pantherleap prompted softly.

"I'm not sure... they're a little numb. How are yours?" Adderheart answered, returning the question as he looked tentatively back to Pantherleap.

"The same," he replied with his tail flickering absently around his paws.

Adderheart didn't like it. He didn't like the weird tension hanging on a thin, wobbly, twisted wire within the thick and hot air. It was as though they both were walking upon broken pebbles noticeable

to the other, but not moveable. The only way it could be moved was if the walker moved them. But in order for that to happen, the other had to move one first.

It created a cycle of which neither could escape, and so Adderheart figured that they'd just be struggling together forever. He took another tentative bite of his mouse and chewed it slowly, swallowing soon after. Shifting absently, he curled his tail around him, and the soft warmth of the moments before returned with a pleasant wave.

He decided that he couldn't let the situation continue as it had been, so he rose carefully and re-settled himself down next to Pantherleap. The tawny tom looked at him with mild curiosity, but he shifted to lay against Adderheart.

A small smile crept onto his features, though it soon faded as he rested back into Pantherleap's large yet lean form. The bigger warrior let his tail curl lightly around Adderheart's, who felt an absent shiver trace his spine with a sharp claw. This felt wrong, but it also felt right. It felt like he was in the right place within the world, but he also felt like he couldn't be more off-course. His skin crawled, and he couldn't help but think of the large tawny paw.

He suddenly felt small and tiny nearby to the strong tom's presence. It wasn't a bad feeling, rather one that allowed for more of a strong-weak relationship. But he wasn't necessarily weak, just not as strong as Pantherleap. The stable warrior seemed to look down at Adderheart, a small and uncertain smile rising on his features.

Adderheart pasted the same one upon his own features as he looked up at Pantherleap. Both toms seemed to shift, ears flickering back and forth. Pantherleap let his tail curl around Adderheart's, and he returned the motion, though a horrifying shiver ran down his spine once more. He kept his ears up but he couldn't stop the growing storm of anxiety within him.

Then, with a jump, the pale tom slipped from Pantherleap's grasp, trembling, and tumbled into his nest.

"Sorry," Adderheart whispered. "I... I can't."

Pantherleap stared at him for a moment or two, eyes flashing before they turned guarded. "W-wait, please, don't say—"

At the genuine fear within Pantherleap's voice, Adderheart suddenly realized something.

No. No. No. No.

No! Not allowed. Not allowed. Can't happen. Not true.

Lies. Lies. Not true! Lies! Stop! No!

The string of words pushed at his muzzle but he kept it slammed shut, and Pantherleap's ears pinned to his skull as he noticed the poorly disguised terror in Adderheart's gray eyes.

"W-wait, Adderheart, please don't go—" Pantherleap's tone wobbled, but Adderheart quickly thrust himself to his paws, taking a few large bounds toward the exit of the den.

"Pl-please—!"

The voice faded away as he ran out of the den.

His pelt felt like plaster, still, and his legs felt as though someone had poured concrete all over them, still, but he kept on going. On the way out, he called to the healers that he'd be taking a walk. Had they heard him? He didn't know or care. His mind was too full of thoughts, thoughts that just skittered and jumped around within his head.

I'm pulling this again.

I'm doing it again.

I'm running from Pantherleap.

Again.

He pushed his way out of camp, and he thought he could actually still hear Pantherleap's voice bouncing around in his ears. It begged him not to do... something. It kept stopping. But it was getting

louder. He continued on, quickly navigating his way out of camp, ears pinning to his skull tightly as he squinted at the light of the sun that let its tip break the horizon. It wasn't night anymore.

The calls continued to get louder, and he whipped around, lip curling. *Shut up, you stupid brain, shut up, shut up, shut up—!*

And there stood Pantherleap, struggling after him, calling out his name, ears flattened, eyes darkened and terrified, figure slack with fear, tail lashing anxiously.

The tom turned once more, hurried in fashion. He couldn't let Pantherleap catch up to him. It felt as though his chest suddenly had been constricted. By what? He didn't know, but it felt like something had grabbed his throat, shook it all up, then placed it back into his body. Then, it had taken his lungs, violently shook them, and then placed them back crookedly.

Everything felt wrong. Breathing was wrong. Pantherleap needed to get away otherwise he'd be wrong. As he ran, he checked behind him, and there was Pantherleap, struggling along. His voice was weak, terrified, trembling among the harsh breezes of a new leaf-bare. The tawny tom seemed to have been reduced to a horrified mess.

Adderheart whipped around once more and he continued along. He struggled to walk faster and faster. Several moments passed and he still struggled along. His paws stumbled across the ground. His mind whipped faster and faster than the wind gathering around him. Everything about this was wrong. Walking away from the cat who wanted to talk to him was wrong.

Walking away from the cat that he had chased for so long was wrong. Pantherleap was being wrong. The thoughts from before surfaced. About Pantherleap. About the elders. *No.* The word rung loudly within his crowded mind. He tried to drown the thoughts of the she-cats and the tom. He wanted to strangle the idea of the relationship between the elders.

That was wrong. By whose standards? *Mine.* The thought popped into his head and a spark of fear lit him like he was a small piece of

flammable grass. *Cougarstar's.* The thought broke through the wall and he shoved it back. No. That wasn't true. *His* standards. It wasn't okay. He was bad for thinking that it had been forced upon him by someone else.

He was wrong.

However, he still continued along. It was a struggle to hurry himself up when he felt as though the eyes around him were closing in tighter and tighter. His pelt prickled as he passed another clearing of trees. And eventually, he seemed to slow. His hurried pawsteps began to trickle to a pause, and then another, and then more and more until he just stopped.

His eyes raked the clearing slowly as if he was dragging a million pieces of prey across the ground. Moving even the simplest of things like his gaze felt so incredibly difficult, and his eyelids fluttered, as if threatening to close immediately. He padded to a tree nearby, looking up into the branches that seemed to stretch forever.

The sun had rested delicately upon the horizon, spreading soft and shimmery rays through the branches. He briefly considered climbing but then the crushing reality of his injuries settled in once more. He probably couldn't climb. *But I just ran forever.* He turned around, looking around the clearing that he appeared to have slowed to.

It was a basic clearing, with trees rising tall into a color-splotched sky and rocks dotted around the ground. The ground was normal in shade. It was a dark greenish-brown, coated in a thick layer of pine needles. It was a usual sight for clearings within SageClan's territory, and Adderheart could faintly scent the usual smell of his Clanmates wreathing the area.

He looked back up to the tree, carefully approaching. His dark gray eyes sharpened, and he recalled previous times he'd been tree-climbing. Each time he'd either fallen or tripped so that his paw had gotten caught in an excruciating way. Perhaps it really wasn't a good idea to climb the tree, especially because of the injuries he already had.

Generally, running away had only been to escape the situation. His mind still roared with thoughts that had been thought to be long-banished, but his figure was no longer stiff. It had simply relaxed. Well, not necessarily *relaxed*, just... slumped. His shoulders had fallen, and his tail brushed absently against the ground. His paws were simply just there.

The tom carefully approached the tree, unsheathing his claws. They shone in the light that broke its way through the thickly-wound branches of the pine tree. He pressed a paw against the bark and then sunk his claws into its somewhat soft surface. It felt strange, as if he was breaking through a barrier that he'd never been able to see.

With a swift movement, he pulled himself upward, trying to haul himself onto a nearby branch. His figure felt as though it had grown a million pounds heavier, but the first branch was so close. It was right there! His dark gray eyes sparked and he attempted to keep going. His mind began to slowly scold him. *Keep going. Go. Up. The tree, go up. Climb it. Keep going up the tree.*

Though, he was unable to. His body was just too heavy for his injured figure to heave up upon the branches, and he was most certainly unable to push past the gathering of pine needles and branches. Usually, SageClan cats could simply push past the branches and escape with a few scratches, but as Adderheart attempted to do so, his pelt felt as though it was on fire with all the scratches littering his figure.

He soon realized that the scratches weren't hurting him; they'd hurt his already-injured figure. His focus slipped and with a hefty *thump!* the warrior collapsed to the ground. Instead of rising to his paws once more, he simply just shifted close to the base of the tree. He let his tail curl tightly around his figure and he shivered upon feeling a small trickle of crimson liquid surround his paw. He lifted it and sniffed the air — blood.

He slammed down the paw and then laid his head, in a slower and more miserable fashion, upon them. He didn't want to be around with the thoughts of Pantherleap running wild within his skull. It wasn't just about Pantherleap, though. The same thoughts from

before he'd climbed the tree, rather attempted to, kept on bouncing around the interior of his skull with a deafening loudness.

You like toms.

Every time it would bubble up he shoved it down. It wasn't an uncommon thought for him, unfortunately, and every time, he pushed it down. It never broke the boundary, killed before it could even live for half a moment. However, it grew more and more prominent as the time with none other than Pantherleap grew. His ears flickered and pinned fiercely.

No, I don't.

He couldn't like toms. It wasn't a matter of wanting to or not; he just simply couldn't. He'd never liked a she-cat before in all of his sixty moons of being alive but that didn't mean he liked toms. He didn't like toms. Never had, never will. It was just a simple matter. He didn't like toms. He wasn't like the elders. He wasn't going to be like the elders.

Yes, I do.

chapter twenty four

But it's not allowed.

He knew it wasn't allowed. He knew it couldn't happen. But it *was*. He *did* like toms. A wave of fury rose within him like the ocean slamming against the quaint shore of a pleasant beach. How come it had to be him? How come he liked toms? His tail flicked harshly and the tears that had been pricking at the edges of his vision vanished instantly.

The tom rose to his paws brusquely, looking around with a fiercely bright dark gray gaze. He was angry, at himself and at anything that had caused it to happen. His blood was boiling furiously as if someone had stuck him into a fire. His ears pinned to his skull as he swept his gaze around. He didn't want to be anywhere, but he certainly didn't want to be curled up like an idiot at the base of a tree.

He stalked forward, tail whipping, heading around a few bushes. His eyes narrowed at the sun that was peeking over the horizon, spreading light onto the path he crept upon. His pawsteps were quiet yet forceful as he pressed each paw down in synchronization. His ears had perked as if he'd expected to find prey, but they had obviously pinned tightly to his skull once more.

How come it has to be me? Why do I have to be like—

He stopped.

Vixenfeather and Milkfrost.

No. It wouldn't happen to him. He would be careful and ensure that nobody knew of his problem. He couldn't like toms but he couldn't stop it, so he'd just hide it. Pretend it didn't exist for him. Pretend he didn't like toms. He couldn't help the flow of thoughts that entered his head, though, but he could just try to block them out, right? He didn't *want* to like toms. He wasn't supposed to; it wasn't

allowed.

He wasn't allowed to. It was as simple as that. One was just not meant to, so nobody did. He couldn't like toms but it wasn't really something he could just avoid, not any longer. It was just something to hide. Nobody could know. Not even Pantherleap. *What if he turns on you?* The thought echoed in his head, venomous and sharp in nature, and his lip curled as he stalked along and past the trees nearby.

He won't. He won't. And it doesn't matter because he won't know because I won't tell him.

Nobody could find out if he didn't tell anyone, right? There wasn't anything that happened to him when he figured it out, right? And there wasn't anything that he would do differently... He wouldn't go around telling anyone, if he found that he liked a specific tom he'd distance himself... *Pantherleap.* The tom kept bobbing up in his mind and Adderheart just didn't want to think about it.

He wanted to ignore it for as long as he could. He knew *why* he couldn't stop thinking about the leader's brother, as it had been an issue for a while, but the real solution had finally seemed to take place within his mind. And now that it was there, he didn't want to address it. The "solution" only caused him more headache. It wasn't really a solution. It was only adding fuel to the blaze.

And then, through the bushes limped Pantherleap.

Are you serious?

A spark of anger let the small piece of grass that was Adderheart catch fire. He swiftly guarded his dark gray eyes and let his tail flicker absently against the ground. Why had he come here? How long had it taken him to march all the way across the territory to get to him? *I'm trying to ignore you. Leave me alone.*

"...Adderheart?"

The voice was so soft, so gentle, so quiet. It was a shock to him that it was Pantherleap's, for it wobbled anxiously back and forth. It

seemed to be teetering on the edge of a cliff that only the toms could see, because at the bottom was something that wasn't allowed.

"What's wrong?" Pantherleap took another step forward, his neck fur rising. His eyes were flashing and he tried to direct his gaze to the ground as if to hide it. Adderheart smothered the flames that were rising within him.

Should I lie?

What if he knows I'm lying?

What will happen if I tell the truth?

"I don't know," Adderheart answered, letting his voice be simple and quiet. If he spoke too loudly, it would just ruin the illusion. His ear twitched as he studied Pantherleap's reaction, which seemed to be next to nothing.

"Can I help you figure out what's wrong, then?" He returned, taking a small step forward. The tom was still injured, his figure littered in patches of herbs. Adderheart looked back at his own figure and saw himself mirrored in him.

He shrugged, letting his figure drift to the ground. He knew it was useless to continually evade questions from Pantherleap, and he likely wouldn't leave anytime soon. Also, his legs ached minimally. It was a soft though present ache that hung over him like a dark and stormy cloud. However, it didn't seem so bad when he sat down.

"I don't know," Adderheart replied again. Pantherleap's muzzle twisted momentarily and he stepped forward, though he pulled himself back sharply and sat down in front of Adderheart. The tawny warrior wrapped his tail over his paws and then looked to the ground.

"Do you want to just sit in silence until one of us gets hungry, then?" Pantherleap asked softly.

Adderheart shrugged once more, letting his own dark gray gaze

drift to the ground.

"Adderheart, please— I want to help... please let me help you."

Well, the problem is that you can't help me because it isn't something that I can fix. It's not allowed and I have to hide it from you. What if you already know? What if you're just trying to get confirmation from me because you have connections to Cougarstar? StarClan, Adderheart, you've really messed everything up this time.

"I don't know what's wrong," Adderheart murmured. A lie, of course. It felt wrong and bad on his tongue as it left his muzzle, almost as bad as the earlier realization of his preferences. *Preferences I shouldn't have,* he thought.

"...come on. You know that's not true."

Pantherleap let his muzzle and head in general drift closer to Adderheart's, and he peered at him.

Then, Adderheart noticed the tawny warrior's eyes. He'd simply thought they were flashing out of confusion and a want to help, but they weren't. His dark green eyes were *sad*. Why? What? That didn't make sense. *Why is* he *sad? He can't want to help. It's not just about wanting to help.*

"Why are you sad?" He blurted, and within moments he knew he'd made a mistake. Pantherleap shifted back, gaze flickering with a bright emotion, and he shook his head.

"Don't try to change the topic," snapped Pantherleap, eyes widening as a paw half-rose to his muzzle. "S-sorry," he flurried, "I didn't m-mean to snap at you, I just want to h-help..."

"You're still avoiding my question..." Adderheart's voice wobbled but he forced it to straighten out.

"Because I want to h-help!" protested Pantherleap. "And you won't let me!"

"Sorry, I just don't think you'd understand," Adderheart admitted. He knew this would likely lead to more questioning, but he just

needed to get Pantherleap off his back. He couldn't tell Pantherleap no matter what happened; the tawny tom couldn't know.

"I... I... Adderheart, please," the warrior pleaded, padding up to him tentatively. A cut on his face had reopened and blood streaked down his cheek like some sort of crimson tear. "Let me help you!"

"It's not a wound you can fix."

A lie.

"Then tell me how to fix it, Adderheart, please," the tom continued, "I want to help..."

StarClan...

He blinked fiercely, hating how his dark gray gaze seemed to blur. He didn't want to tell the tom for he knew it would simply just get out of control from there. If he told him about liking toms, the likelihood of him spilling the rest on accident was very high. And he simply couldn't do that.

It would be like social suicide... he wouldn't be able to talk to anyone. Nobody would talk to him. Pantherleap would tell Cougarstar, he'd get kicked out, and then he'd become... a rogue. He'd be like one of the rogues that SageClan hated. And nobody would speak to him. He would just fade away, into the background, irrelevant...

Or maybe he'd be used as an example. An example of what not to do, not to be. However, Cougarstar hadn't utilized the elders, though perhaps they were too old and too quiet to be made an example of. But him, a hardworking, strong warrior, poisoned by thoughts of liking toms, and kicked from the Clan because of it... His ear flicked anxiously, and Pantherleap lifted a paw to his chin.

"Hey, I know you're getting worked up, just... just please, tell me... how to help you."

He knows what happens to my face when I get worried and when I think. He knows what happens to my face when I get worried and when I think.

The thought bounced around loudly within his skull and the pale tom swallowed nervously, letting his dark gray gaze drift upward. It met with Pantherleap's pale green eyes, which were lit with intensity, and although it appeared as though it was only filled with such, Adderheart knew there was a film of anxiety behind them.

"Adderheart," he mewed once more and his voice was almost tinged with something alike to a warning.

"Pantherleap, I can't tell you," he said, trying to keep his voice professional. He couldn't let any emotion leak into his voice... if he did, it was likely he'd spill his secret without meaning to.

"Please let me help—!"

"I can't. I can't!" He snapped, and a strange chill ran down his spine. He shook his head and stepped backward, a swirl of anxiety rising within him. "I can't tell you, I can't."

"Why not?" Pantherleap asked softly. He approached Adderheart who shifted backward, panic climbing up his throat. "Please, I just want to help."

He wants to help. Let him help.

The thoughts had begun to infect his mind since the panic had grown. It was like a monster, rising and clambering upward within his throat, snatching his breath from his lungs and replacing it with an awkwardly slow-moving black sludge. Adderheart knew he shouldn't tell, but he wanted to help. Pantherleap was willing to help.

You can't. You can't!

He'd just figured it out for himself. Was it really smart to do it now? It was never smart to do it, really, but he should probably figure some stuff out before he spilled it to someone. He shouldn't. Couldn't. Wouldn't. *Really* shouldn't. It would be death for him. Pantherleap could tell someone and then he'd be doomed all over again—

We already did this.

I already thought about this.

"I like toms."

At the moment that silence clogged the air, Adderheart truly, honestly, if-he-could've-he-would've wanted to—

"So do I."

In unison, both warriors stumbled backward, jaws dropping at the same time.

"Wait, you do?"

The words this time were spoken at the same time, and Adderheart couldn't help but want to slam his head into the tree behind him till it bled and till he was gone.

Pantherleap couldn't like toms. For how long had he known? Had it been longer than a couple of moons? Had he figured it out recently? Or had he been hiding it for moons and moons, able to conceal his feelings from the cats who would truly and honestly hate his very guts if they'd learned of it—

"How long?" Adderheart blurted. "How long have you known?"

"As long as I—" Pantherleap stopped, breath suddenly caught in his throat. "No, no, no, I can't, can't, sorry, I—"

The tom had begun to back up nervously, ears flickering down. Panic grasped Adderheart and he lurched forward, hissing out a "No, wait, Pantherleap" as he slammed a paw down on the tom's tail.

"Don't. Don't tell. Please."

"I'm not going to, do you think I would expose myself too? I just— I —"

"What? What? I want to help, please tell me, I can't— I can't let you get away."

"Do you not trust me?" Pantherleap turned slowly and he looked to Adderheart. "Do you not trust me?"

"I do, Pantherleap, I swear!"

"R-really? Because you're telling me that you thought I was going to go and tell Cougarstar!"

"Pantherleap, I—"

"No, Adderheart! You don't tr-trust me. You don't." His voice grew quiet and at the edges of his vision pricked a couple of tears.

Swallowing heavily, Adderheart lifted a paw and brushed away the tom's tears. They wet his paw but he didn't care, only setting it back down upon the ground, and Pantherleap stared at him with large, rounded, green eyes.

"You like me, don't you?"

The words had left Adderheart's maw before he'd even realized it. The pale warrior looked up to a startled Pantherleap and the senior warrior stumbled backward, eyes rounding even further. Panic and alarm flashed clear and bright upon his expression and at that moment, Adderheart regretted his entire life.

How come he had to be this way? Quiet, non-assertive, but expressive with the cat he loved? The cat he couldn't love. The cat that loved him back. The cat that couldn't love him back. The cat whose brother had no heart and had never loved anyone.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Pantherleap immediately apologized, wobbling for a moment as he fell upon the ground. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please, please, I don't want to love you but I just can't help it—" His breath hitched and he slammed his head on the ground.

"Pantherleap, stop, stop," he said, trying to approach the warrior, but he just scrambled back.

"Don't touch me! D-don't touch me! I don't want to do anything, don't, don't...!"

Adderheart forcefully nudged the tom and pressed a paw down upon his. "Hey. Hey! Stop."

"You— you stop! Stop! I'm n-not doing anything, don't tell anyone pl-please, please, please... Cougarstar would kill me, he'd, he'd... he'd kill me, please don't tell him, don't tell B-Bearpatch either or anyone, it's our s-s-secret..."

"I'm not going to tell anyone! I'm not! Pantherleap, just stop and listen to me—"

"Thank you, th-thank you," he spluttered, trying to head forward, "don't t-tell anyone, please, I— this d-didn't happen. I don't like toms, I'm sorry, I lied, I don't like y-you Adderheart, I'm s-s-sorry—"

"I said, stop—!"

The air seemed to shatter as Adderheart's sharp voice split it, but Pantherleap's panic patched it up.

"I'm s-s-sorry, I didn't m-mean to lie, I... just needed a scapegoat! I'm s-sure you know about them, r-right? Don't h-hate me, don't t-tell anyone, don't t-tell T-Tinydust, please, please, pl-please—"

"I like you too, Pantherleap!"

Pantherleap stilled and then turned to look up and over at the warrior. His eyes squinted and he let out an awkward laugh, "D-don't lie, Add-Adderheart, you don't need to l-lie. Just don't tell anyone, ok-okay?"

You can go back. You can claim it as a lie. You don't have to do this. You can go back. You don't have to ruin everything. You don't have to do this. You don't have to do this. You can fix it. You can fix it all. You —

"I'm serious! I'm s-serious!" Adderheart began to tremble as Pantherleap went on and on.

"N-no need to lie, don't lie, don't lie," he stumbled over his words. "Please, please, it's okay I s-swear. Just don't tell anyone. Don't tell!" He gave the pale tom a watery smile as he staggered up to his paws,

wiping his blurry gaze with the back of his paw. "P-promise?"

"Do you think I'm lying? Do you?" Adderheart wasn't angry, more concerned; he'd never seen Pantherleap this way, and for most it could tear them apart, but Adderheart just wanted to protect him. He wanted to grow to be a large, pale-furred bear and surround the senior warrior within a hug.

"Promise?" Pantherleap repeated, the watery smile still upon his features.

"I'm s-serious, Pantherleap!" He forced the stutter out of his tone. "I'm serious! I'm serious! Believe me, please, Pantherleap..."

The senior warrior slowed down for a moment, and Adderheart could almost see Pantherleap's world crash around him. He stumbled backward, eyes rounding to the size of a moon, and a terrible panic suddenly scrawled itself all over his expression. He whipped around and then spluttered out a few words.

"T-talk l-l-later—"

And with that, Pantherleap was gone.

chapter twenty five

At first, Adderheart was silent.

He watched as Pantherleap's figure disappeared between the swath of trees and pine needles nearby. He heard the tom's pawsteps fade away, blending easily into the background of noises. He kept his dark gray gaze stuck upon the place where the tom had left. He tried to keep his gaze clear. It blurred and tears pricked at the edges of his vision anyway.

Blinking fiercely, he tried to get them away. He didn't move, for now at least. His figure was stone still, rigid and tall, shoulders jutted outward. His pale creamy-brown fur had rose in fear, terror, shame... perhaps all of the negative emotions, instead of just a few. He smoothed it against his lean figure, letting it fall as quickly as it had rose.

And then, as he tried to lift a paw to swipe at his blurring gaze, everything came rushing back.

The complete and total pain of his injuries swept over him like a blazing inferno and he stumbled, mind instantly whirling. His legs ached and his jaw felt as though it had unhinged from his muzzle completely. His tail and haunches were agonized the most, though. He staggered forward once more and he nearly tripped himself. He uprighted himself quickly, shaking out his fur, only to feel a trickle of blood run down his flank.

I can't go back to camp.

He couldn't stop replaying the scene in his mind.

He'd told Pantherleap. He'd somehow managed to push past the overwhelming wall of 'no' to be able to tell someone. And that someone felt the same way...? He regretted it. Everything would be so much harder; they loved each other and they knew that, but nobody else could. They'd have to hide it. The elders popped up

within his mind.

At that moment, he truly regretted his very existence.

Adderheart didn't know what to do. He didn't want to go back to camp. That was likely where Pantherleap had gone, back to the medicine cat's den with the healers that didn't understand their relationship, with the cats in the camp that didn't understand what it was like... he'd probably claimed injury. *Or he's wandering the territory.*

If he didn't claim injury, I should just do that.

It wasn't really a bad option. It wasn't a good one, either. What else could he do, though? He couldn't wander the territory. That was a surefire way to run into Pantherleap again. And really, that was the last thing he wanted. He didn't think he could talk to the tom anytime soon. *Going to camp will let me avoid him.*

But I've been out for a while. I can't just go back and say 'I was on a walk, don't mind my injuries'.

There wasn't anything else to do, though. He couldn't stay in the forest; Pantherleap would somehow end up finding him and then the whole situation would just be worsened. He couldn't just stand around; that would just make it harder to go back. But he couldn't just go back, right? It would be suspicious. He needed a cover-up.

There were a couple of things he could do.

I can claim I fell off a tree during hunting.

Theoretically, the idea wasn't a bad one. It would be a fairly usual explanation for the reopened cuts upon his pelt, his slightly disheveled look, and he could always claim it as soon as he went back to the healer's den. He wasn't exactly a great climber, and he was sure that some cats had taken notice to it. It seemed foolproof; no major issues had popped up as he'd originally thought of it.

Though, the more he paused to think about it, the plan was a little suspicious. He'd already told the healers he'd gone out to take a walk and spontaneously going to hunt up a tree when he already

knew of his issue with climbing, and climbing with injuries... that was rather dumb, and the healers knew he wasn't stupid. He scrapped the idea. *Too many issues.*

The next idea was a little weak. It didn't have much to back it up, but what else could he do?

I tripped and fell into a bramble bush.

Generally, bramble bushes weren't too common. More often it was just a swath or two of strangely positioned thorns. Though he could always say that, and for an injured cat, it wouldn't be too unlikely for him to wander a bit and then lose his place where he was walking, causing him to trip and fall into the bushes.

But what if they asked how far he'd gone? He hadn't really been keeping track of where they were, rather just... the opposite really. He had just found Pantherleap, and then the entire world around him had seemed completely irrelevant to the tawny tom. There were a lot of problems with that one, too, and although the issue itself could've been easier to believe, there were issues in the timeline.

And despite the fact it was sort of a last-attempt, the one he assumed wouldn't work at all, it was definitely more than the previous ideas he'd had, and this one was sticking. At least a little.

If I go back to camp and pretend I passed out, then they'll be forced to heal me.

It was a risky game, though. If he flinched or moved too much, it would be clear that he wasn't passed out. But if he managed to get treated, he could just lie and say that he didn't remember anything from the walk. It was a simple lie, but there had to be traces of his and Pantherleap's meeting somewhere. Maybe on his pelt, maybe on the ground—

Fox-dung. My scent.

There was almost no way that he didn't smell at least a little bit like the tom, and there was absolutely no way that there was no trail of

his scent and the other warrior's. *And the blood!* There was no way that there wasn't a small spot or two of blood. His head shook momentarily, ears twitching with irritation. *None of these plans are going to work.*

But he had to pick some plan. He had to choose one thing at least to do. The plan that he would end up choosing might not have been perfect, but none of the plans were. He couldn't just stand around and hope that something would happen that would allow him to easily and quickly be healed without too many questions. But that wasn't possible.

So, he was swift to head back to the camp.

Upon arriving, he tried to shove himself into a sickly mindset. He tried to feel tired. He tried to be woozy. He tried to appear as though he was wobbling on his paws. He tried to make it believable, as every other aspect of the plan was easily discoverable. But if he was able to portray himself well enough, able to appear tired and woozy and distracted enough...

Adderheart wobbled unsteadily into the camp, and he let his head drift forward and backward as if he was confused as to where he was. He noticed that the camp was empty. Not a soul was around.

Anxiety sparked within him. If he just showed up, collapsed in the healer's den, that was far more suspicious. But he had to trust that someone was in the healer's den. Someone... someone had to be, right? It couldn't be empty. And then with a jolt he remembered he was standing in the middle of camp and he pretended to blanch and lurch forward.

Wobbling, he made his way into the healer's den, and he stammered in a deep, rolling tone, "H-h-help..."

Carefully, he stumbled his way toward a nest, and with a soft groan that he had to feign to the best of his ability, he flopped down. He kept his figure slack, his ears pinned, his eyes half-open and glazed. He kept his paws somewhat splayed to show that he was injured and it had been somewhat of a recent injury... that he needed help.

And eventually, a cat wandered into the den.

He couldn't tell who it was. Their pawsteps were soft, with gentle motions of assumedly a tail or ears flickering. Their breathing was controlled though a little choppy, but they were quick to notice his figure, and he quickly stopped breathing.

In the split second before the cat shrieked, he knew exactly who it was.

"*Adderheart!*"

The tom whipped around, sprinting from the den as best as he could with his injuries. The senior warrior was distressed, rushing around the camp before racing back into the healer's den, as his pawsteps grew louder and closer once more. His screams had quieted to shouts but Adderheart could tell he was afraid. And he felt bad for it.

"Coalbelly! Twilightcloud!"

Within moments, cats were swarming around him. The smell of herbs wreathed around him and warm pelts pressed all around. He tried to breathe softly, quietly, gently, so nobody would suspect anything, but he was unable to do so. All the pelts, all the bodies, Pantherleap being the one to discover him, causing him that amount of fear, after all that had *already* happened—

He jolted up and gasped for air, eyes flying open as if he was recovering from being drowned. He panted heavily as if he had just carried an entire camp of cats up a mountain, dark gray eyes sweeping the area, and all the cats that he thought would've been around *were* around; Pantherleap, Coalbelly, Twilightcloud, and for some reason, Tinydust was there, as well as Streamfang.

"Adderheart? Adderheart? What happened?"

"What's going on?" That was an apprentice. *Finchpaw?*

"I don't know!"

"He's injured... I don't know what from. He just showed up. And he's

injured..."

The voices drifted in and out, but Coalbelly's sharp tone rose above the rest. "Adderheart, I need you to tell me what happened! And I need the rest of you to get out!" He watched through a blurry gaze as she whipped around and drew her lips back in a vicious snarl.

He couldn't really see them disappear, but he could see their pelts dissipate. They seemed to just be there for one moment and then gone the next. His vision was blinking in and out, black dots and swirls appearing near the edges of it, and he swayed back and forth as he blinked. He tried to focus upon the leaving cats, but his head was suddenly pounding and he didn't know why.

A wave of terror clasped him as he swayed once more and Coalbelly nearly caught him, though he tumbled momentarily. Slamming his head onto the nest, his head lolled before the healer was swift to lift it once more, giving him a small herb that he had trouble swallowing. He didn't know what has happening. It was all too fast.

Despite the quickness of it all, he could still make out sounds. They were somewhat soft and blurred, as if someone had placed something over his ears, and in a monetary panic he swiped his paws rapidly over his head to see if anyone had actually played a trick on him by messing with his hearing. But there was just nothing there. It was him. His fault.

"...help! I don't know what... possibly went... wrong!"

"...matter. He just... I suppose, and besides, the healers are..."

That sounded like a warrior's voice. But it wasn't recognizable. It wasn't blurry anymore, none of the voices were; they just flitted by in little pieces.

"...on. Tell... Adderheart is definitely... never happened."

"Tell me what's...!"

That one was Finchpaw. Again.

He was reminded of the apprentices and the whole fiasco with

Pantherleap, and the fact that he had never actually figured out what those noises were, and the fact that he'd never learned about what happened during the mid-assessments, and that Pantherleap was the one to have found him lying there, which wasn't the plan at all—

"Adderheart, hey, tell me what happened!" Coalbelly turned back around, tail flashing directly into his face. He had began to breathe heavier and heavier, unable to keep up with the rush of thoughts that ran to his head and unable to keep up with the blood sprinting to his head.

He tried to lift his hands up as if to grab the she-cat and beg for help but he simply sort of collapsed forward, gasping like a fish out of water. She propped him back up and patted his back with her dark tail with a swift motion, trying to help as best as she could.

"H-h-help—" he wheezed, trying to clear his head. It was too fast. How come this had never happened before and how come it was happening now? How come this hadn't really happened before... Unless he'd forgotten. Memories popped up within his mind of a similar situation with an apprentice, and then later with a warrior, at different times with different cats around the one, but it dissipated instantly.

Twilightcloud suddenly appeared within his vision and pressed a cold bundle of moss upon his forehead, and he felt calm. The entire world had stopped spinning. His thoughts went blank, and the good kind of blank. His vision returned to usual. He could hear. See. Talk. He was breathing. Calmly. Usually. It was working. He was breathing now.

"Good idea," murmured Coalbelly, pressing a paw on his flank. "Now Adderheart, I need you to tell me what happened so we can help. Was it rogues? Was it a cat? What happened?"

He just sat. Breathing. Listening. His eyes stared ahead, as if a strange, cold calm had controlled him from the start. His tail didn't move, his ears didn't move, and he was simply just sat. He was breathing still. Still. Somehow. His mind was blank, completely empty, void of thought, and it was fine. Fine. He was fine.

But he didn't smile or move. Not move that much, anyway. It was like some sort of strange encasing had surrounded him. He hadn't caught what Coalbelly asked. He looked to her with a half-curious look, his head tipping to the side. His heart sprung into his throat upon realizing what the healer had said.

It wasn't rogues. It hadn't been rogues. Had it? His injuries weren't great but the ones that had been added weren't from the rogues. His memory had faded, momentarily blinked out, partially dissipated. And now he couldn't remember.

"Was it the rogues, Adderheart?" Twilightcloud asked once more. Her tone was careful and easy as it drifted across a pleasant breeze toward him.

Then he realized there was no breeze and he began to panic once more. His ears perked tall, eyes suddenly flashing, and Coalbelly scrambled to grab the moss. Her paws splayed momentarily as she quickly snatched it, pressing it upon his forehead. But it only escalated his motions, his heart slamming harder and harder against his figure.

And once more, when Twilightcloud pressed more cold and dripping moss on his face, he was calm.

Not necessarily calm. He was breathing again. His heart was normal. It had never been an issue in the first place, right? Yes. Of course. It could've never been an issue. All was well. He was fine. He was breathing. He could see. And hear. Clearly. Clearly so that he could hear what the cats were saying about him outside.

"...attack!"

"...keeps on thrashing and... he's not well... rogues?"

It crossed his mind for a moment in a streak of golden across the blank white of his thoughts. Were they talking about him? No. Surely not. He wasn't thrashing. Only sitting. Breathing. He was calm. Collected and pleasantly just sitting, causing no problems.

"Adderheart, listen, look at me," Coalbelly pleaded, moving to stand

in front of him, but his gaze only stared uselessly ahead. "Was it the rogues?"

He was calm. He didn't need to answer. He could hear her but she could get the answer on her own, right? It was simple enough. It wasn't the rogues. Obviously. His injuries were too minor for that. Clearly. He was calm. It kept circling back to that. He was breathing. Calm. Usual. He didn't know what was wrong, why everyone was worrying. Because he was calm. Breathing. Normal. He could see.

And then everything rushed back: the noise, the thoughts, the memories, the mutters from the clearing, the... everything. His eyes glazed and he slumped upon the nest, and the entire world blinked away.

chapter twenty six

He was standing in the middle of camp and he had no injuries.

Adderheart looked around, a sudden wave of terror surrounding him. How had he gotten here? He didn't remember anything from the days before... how long had it been since he'd been out? He assumed that he was better now. But why was he in camp?

And then he turned momentarily and there, upon the highrock, was Cougarstar.

The leader was staring down at him furiously, glaring and hissing at him, but no words escaped his muzzle. Beside him stood the healers and his heir, all of which were studying the senior warrior with critically sharp gazes. He stumbled back and then looked around once more, and suddenly the entire camp seemed to be crowding around him.

But not actually *around* him. Rather just... it was as though they were observing a caged animal. But he didn't understand; he wasn't and hadn't done anything wrong. Why was everyone so upset? *Did they figure out my lie? Did I not cover my tracks?* He opened his muzzle to speak but no words came out, and his ears pinned to his skull.

"Adderheart!"

Cougarstar's brash voice split the clearing and the warrior turned around, and in that moment, he remembered exactly what had happened before he'd feigned passing out. And he knew exactly what had happened to get him in this situation. Panic rose and clamped a paw around his throat and his breathing swiftly deteriorated.

"Willowdapple!"

What?

The she-cat looked surprised but she was shoved forward by a snarling cat in the crowd.

"My heir and I have discovered you to be going against rules that I have set in place for specific reasons!"

Cougarstar looked to Willowdapple and Adderheart watched as terror consumed her expression. She, involuntarily, shifted closer to him, to the point where their fur brushed and he felt a strong urge to get away from her. He needed to, it wasn't allowed, he couldn't... he couldn't... but he simply swallowed and let his form go rigid.

"Willowdapple," Bearpatch began. His voice was a lot stricter and overall simpler than his father's as he continued, "you've named your kits after cats that have broken our code, and you know what they did was not allowed. Why would you do this?"

"To preserve their memories," she blurted, shaking.

"They need to be forgotten," Cougarstar snapped, his figure rising as to ensure he appeared tall and strong. "But if you rename them, you'll get off with a warning."

That's not fair!

"What will I rename them?" She asked softly.

"You will rename them after the excelling warriors of this Clan," Palewhisker spoke up. His voice was firm and hard, emotionless and rude. "Myself and Cougarstar."

"I'm not calling them Palekit and Cougarkit," she murmured, shaking her head.

No. No. No.

"You will not; those names are for far better warriors," Cougarstar interrupted, "but you will find a way to relate their names to us, understood? We will hold a re-naming ceremony tomorrow, and nobody is to refer to those kits as their current names. And the dead ones, too. You must rename them too."

"After who...?"

"My brother and mate," Cougarstar decided, whipping his tail. "Speaking of my brother..."

What? What? No. No. No.

"Recently, it's been discovered that a certain warrior has been following the actions of the elders that Willowdapple's kits have been named after," Cougarstar continued, turning to face Adderheart with a malicious smile rising on his features. "And I think I have the perfect punishment. Pantherleap?"

The healers leapt off the highrock in unison. Confused, he followed them with his dark gray gaze and what he saw made him want to vomit and then leave the entire world. The healers dragged him out of their den and laid Pantherleap down on the ground.

He was bleeding from a million cuts and scratches. Even his throat had a small gash upon it as if someone had tried to slit it but failed, and his tail was in ruins. His ears were shredded and his paws just looked like little fleshy masses at the bottom of his legs. Adderheart squeezed his eyes shut and turned sharply away, though when he opened them, he was face-to-face with Cougarstar.

"Kill him."

The senior warrior upon the ground let out a strained noise: "N-no..."

"Kill him or you die."

Adderheart wanted to vomit all over everything. He couldn't kill Pantherleap. How long had it been since he'd figured it out? It had to be a dream. It was a dream, right? Right? This couldn't be real. It couldn't be. He bit sharply down on his tongue and soon found that blood was flowing from his muzzle. Shocked, he stumbled back.

Cougarstar lifted a paw and suddenly his bones felt old and weak. And suddenly he felt like an elder. And suddenly it felt like an elder was next to him, too, who had equally weak and old bones. Stiffly, he turned around to face his bleeding lover, and the feeling

disappeared.

"D-don't... Adderheart, pl-please don't..."

I have to. I have to.

He padded over to Pantherleap and unsheathed his claws. At this noise, the warrior convulsed, blood exiting his maw with a spurt. Adderheart stopped breathing, hating the smell of blood that clouded the air from his injuries. He wanted to lick them all clean and ensure he could never be hurt again. But he had to kill him. He had to live.

Lifting a paw, he brought it close to Pantherleap's throat. The senior warrior convulsed again and he vomited, whereupon Adderheart jumped back and accidentally sliced the tom's neck.

"A-Adderheart!" He yowled, convulsing again on the ground. His neck was now completely soaked in blood. "H-help! Help!" He screamed again, voice going raw for the ground around him was now also soaked in blood. Everything was bloody. He looked down at his paws and found them bloody. And his legs were bloody too.

"H-help! Help! H-help m-me, I'm g-going to d-die—!" The screeches of the warrior hurt him and so he lunged forward, pressing against Pantherleap's figure.

Let this be a dream. Please... please let this be a dream. This can't happen. This won't. Can't.

"Y-you aren't, I swear... you won't die, Pantherleap, just... just get up and w-we'll get you to the healers..." He stumbled over his words, gaze blurring with tears, and the laughs of nearby warriors reached his ears. Shame heated up his pelt but he pressed a paw against Pantherleap's throat, trying to stop the bleeding. And then a claw slit his own.

Cougarstar, laughing maniacally, backed up, his paws clouded with the crimson liquid. Adderheart tumbled backward, gasping for air, trying to breathe and talk to Pantherleap, trying to stay alive, but the world was fading. Laughing filled his senses until a cat raced

over and pressed paws over both of his ears.

"W-Willowdapple...?"

And then he woke up.

It was a dream. It was a dream. It was a dream.

The world wasn't spinning but it wasn't exactly stable, either. He was still in the healer's den and the pain from his injuries was just a dull ache now. Panic climbed a staircase within him and he shook his head fiercely. It had been fake. It wasn't real. Willowdapple and her kits were okay. Pantherleap was okay. Nobody was dead or in pain.

He looked around, ears pinned tightly to his skull. His fur was rigidly stiff and it felt uncomfortably warm as if greenleaf had suddenly arrived without telling anyone of its arrival. The air of the healer's den felt rigid and stale as if some sort of leaf-bare chill had infected the pleasant greenleaf's homecoming.

Was that really all a dream?

His eyes brimmed momentarily but he whisked the blurriness within them away with the back of his front paw, ears flickering sharply. He rose to his paws unsteadily, lurching forward to the exit of the den. He peeked out of the den, noting that the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon.

Carefully, he lifted himself so that he could walk easier, and with that, he made his way out of the healer's den.

He had to check in on everyone. He had to see if Willowdapple was okay, if her kits were doing well; he had to check in on Pantherleap, too, they had to discuss things and get it over with... *and maybe I should go see Finchpaw.* That one wasn't necessarily sprung from the dream but he recalled her to be around when he'd arrived.

He probably would have to think of a story to tell the healers too. Had Willowdapple been around for his episode? Pantherleap surely had... everyone was bound to hate him. He'd made a scene...

The warrior pushed himself forward and toward the nursery, recoiling at the faint and somewhat fleshy scent that drifted from its entrance. With a critical movement, he managed to enter, and the sleeping Willowdapple suddenly lifted her head.

"What do you want?"

She appeared frightened as if he would and could lash out with his strange movements at any time, with his inability to breathe at that very moment, with his weird episode right at that time. Her ears were pinned and her tail was wrapped tightly around her kits. He couldn't shake off the notion that something was wrong.

"Don't tell anyone about your kits," he mewed, voice quiet and drifting. "You're going to get in trouble because of them."

"Wh-what? Has someone figured it out?" She asked immediately, staring down at the bundles of fur with a fiercely lit gaze.

"No, nobody has. But you need to be careful, Willowdapple... you and your kits are in danger if anyone finds out."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're going to tell someone?" She accused. "Because I told you not to tell anyone, or have you already spilled my secret?"

Adderheart's ears flicked and threatened to pin. "No! I haven't, I swear, I wouldn't do that. That's certain death for me, you, and your litter."

Her muzzle, which had drawn back into a snarl, now appeared to be morphing swiftly to normal. "But why are you warning me now? Did something happen?"

He really wasn't willing to tell her about the dream he had... it would just expose him further and he wasn't willing to tell her about liking toms. If he had to pick anyone to tell about it, he would tell her, but he wasn't going to tell her. He couldn't. It was too fresh discovered to tell anyone besides the parties involved.

So he shook his head at a reasonable pace, not wanting to appear stressed. "No, but I was just thinking. If someone finds out,

Cougarstar will kill you, Willowdapple."

Her ears pinned before she forced them to perk once more and she narrowed her eyes. "Then he won't find out, simple as that."

"It's not that easy," he started, sniffing, catching the strange scent from earlier.

"But you've not told anyone and neither have I, so how could anyone find out?" She pressed.

"Because it's kind of obvious," he mewed, ears flicking. "Stagkit and Featherkit are the parts of her name. Well, one's disguised a little, but if anyone finds out you had a litter of four and the names of the rest of your litter, then it's all over, and if you tell them I knew, then..."

"It's not that obvious," she answered, sweeping her tail sharply over their figures. "My kits are completely fine. I think you're just overreacting... you always have done so."

"I haven't!" He protested, sitting down closer to her, and she bared her teeth at him, though she made no effort to get him away.

"You think I've not heard what happened?"

"I figured that you did but that's not relevant," he said with a dismissive flick of his paw. Willowdapple's ears twitched and she narrowed her eyes.

"So? What happened? Was it the rogues? Everyone thought that it must've been."

Feeling suddenly defensive, he answered with a light edge to his tone, "Why do you want to know?"

She opened her muzzle to speak but then paused, narrowing her eyes momentarily. "Because you're my Clanmate," she replied carefully, "and I think it's important to know so we can launch more attacks on them. Bearpatch thinks he's found a camp of them, and he thought he found the elders' scents woven in."

They're alive?

"Wait, what? Really? How?" His tail wrapped around his figure and she rolled her brown eyes.

"He was exploring to found out what happened to you but could only find trails of blood all around. He wasn't able to directly trace back the bloody trails to the place where he thought the camp was but he was able to find other pawprints to them," she explained. "Everyone thinks the rogues ambushed you when you were hunting alone."

She paused to let silence settle over them and she motioned at him impatiently as if expecting him to confirm or deny what she'd said. Her ears pricked and he shifted, unsure of whether or not to tell the truth. Would it be safe to tell her at least that it wasn't the rogues?

And if the elders were there... that probably meant Cougarstar knew and was planning an attack on them soon enough. Or maybe Bearpatch hadn't told his father yet, which really wouldn't make sense. Or maybe everyone knew but Cougarstar had claimed it to be a lie... perhaps he wasn't ready for a battle.

Though that didn't fit his character. Cougarstar was always ready for a battle. But considering the death of Brindlebreeze, maybe he would think it better to let them attack him first. If they could hold up against the rogues, he'd surely launch an attack sooner or later, though.

"Hello?" Willowdapple prompted.

"Nothing, sorry," he mewed with a shake of his head forming. "I've got to go."

"Adderheart, you didn't answer me at all," Willowdapple interrupted, appearing suddenly distressed that he was rising to his paws. "Wait, don't go!"

"Come on, Willowdapple. I've got to go." He glanced over his shoulder as he approached the den's entrance and she flicked her tail sharply, thumping it against the ground as she shook her head.

"I said don't go, just... just stay for a little longer?" She asked, glancing up toward him.

"Sorry... I can't. I can get something for you to eat, though," he offered, ears flickering in a guilty manner. He had to check up on Pantherleap, though of course, he had to actually find the warrior first, which he assumed would provide a challenge.

"Yes, please."

The pale tom leapt swiftly from the den, his ears flickering still. He felt bad that he wasn't able to stick around longer, but he was a little confused from the interaction. Since when had the she-cat wanted to speak with him and wanted him to be around? He'd thought she'd hated him, but now she was acting all flustered around him.

Anxiety swirled up within him at a possibility that rose in his mind, and he was swift to get rid of it. He didn't need to be concerned with her right now. He had to focus on Pantherleap. Quickly, he headed for the fresh-kill pile and grabbed the first thing on it, which happened to be a plump bird.

He turned and headed back for the nursery, slipping inside, and he was shocked to find that Willowdapple was fiddling with something at her belly. It looked as though she was patting her kits though in a specific manner, and he padded over, peeking over her tail.

Horrified, she pulled back and wrapped her tail around the bundles, and he counted them.

One, two... three, four.

"Why did you keep them?" His muzzle dropped, and the plump bird did so too, falling upon the ground with a light slap. She pulled further back into the nest, worried and frenzied, sweeping her tail around her alive and dead kits.

"D-don't tell anyone, please," she whispered hoarsely, looking down at her half-alive litter. "I c-can't lose them. Don't let them d-die, let them st-stay here and maybe they c-can live..."

He carefully approached her, a shiver running down his spine, and she continually pulled back away from him. Her head swung rapidly in a back and forth motion and he placed a paw on hers.

"Let me see them."

"N-no, I c-can't, you'll t-take them from me..."

"Willowdapple, I'm not here to take them from you. I just want to see them." *A lie.*

She carefully uncurled her tail from the kits at her belly and revealed them.

The two kits that were alive pressed against each other with little mews forming as their mother removed her tail. Warmth seemed to be lost and they snuggled in closer to her belly. But two of them didn't move. Two of them stayed where they were, splayed but somehow managed to be in a sort of curled figure. Their tails lay askew from their figures, and their eyes were shut.

Gently, he swept one up within his paws and quickly took the other. "W-w-wait, Add-Adderheart, I thought you s-said you wouldn't—!"

"I'm not going to tell anyone," he mewed softly, patting her with his tail. She recoiled with her lips drawing back, and she, shaking, rose to her paws. "Hey, hey. Sit down, I'm not going to do anything with them." *Another lie.*

It slipped off his tongue in a rough way that he despised. *Just another secret to keep.*

"Wh-why— just p-put them down, I w-want my kits..." She lifted a paw as if to reach for her dead kits, but she laid down, still trembling.

"You can't keep them—"

"Y-yes I can! I've k-kept them this far— y-you lied to me! Give me Whitekit and Sn-Snowkit! Come here, c-come to mother little ones..." she cooed unsteadily, as if she was really talking to them.

But after a moment, she seemed pleased once more, murmuring something that sounded like "Snowkit, be n-nice to your siblings" before she wrapped her tail around the two kits once more.

He turned and mewed a quick "See you later" and with that, he left the den.

chapter twenty seven

As he left, he realized his mistake.

I have no idea what to do with these kits.

And furthermore, he wasn't sure if there were cats around. If there were cats in the camp, they'd certainly all be suspicious of what he was doing with two corpses. But he couldn't explain it to them, could he? He wasn't going to expose what Willowdapple was doing. It was just another secret to keep.

Sunlight blasted his vision and the pale tom reared back, quick to turn and shield the two limp figures in his jaws with his body. The sun was so bright, though still pale, that he couldn't even tell if there were cats in camp. So, he made a beeline for the exit, and with that, he left the camp.

The herbs all over his fur had started to peel off, growing crusty and somewhat old despite having only gone through a little wear and tear. Generally, his plan was to talk to Pantherleap next. But he still had to find the senior warrior, and even more still he had to go back to the healers' den.

Quickly heading out into the territory, he soon spotted a tree that appeared good enough for a grave. Crouching next to it, he unsheathed his claws, laying the two kits on the ground gently, and he started to dig. Instantly, his paws ached from the motion of digging endlessly, but he did it anyway. If he was quick, he could always snag something from the healers and get something to ensure the nursery didn't smell too bad.

Eventually, there was a small hole at the base of the tree. A small section of the pine needles had been cleared out in order to provide easy access. The hole was rounded and considerably deep, and behind the tom, there was a large pile of dirt. He huffed and stood there for a moment or two, trying to catch his breath.

Then, silently, he took the kits, one by one, and placed them into the grave. He looked down at their two little forms, pitiful, sad, helpless, gone and empty, and without a second thought, he scooped dirt back into the grave. Patting it back on, he eventually re-constructed a layer of the pine needles atop it, too, though he let a couple poke upward as if to mark the area.

Instead of going back right away, he patted the layer down firmer, and he leaned down and gently touched the ground with his nose.

StarClan, if you're listening, take these kits gently. They have done nothing wrong to deserve their fates that ended so horribly and tragically, but only some would say it's better than being alive. But these kits deserved to have a life, so let them in StarClan.

Let them play in the fields of stars for moons, until they come back and ask for training from a starry warrior, and if that warrior deny them training, send someone else over to help out. And let Willowdapple know of their adventures. She would find great comfort in it.

With that, he turned around and headed back to camp.

He didn't really feel all that sad. He wasn't sad for the kits' passings, he wasn't sad for Willowdapple, trying to keep some of her dead litter around to ease her grief, he wasn't sad for himself, for all the stuff that had gone on recently... but he was nervous.

Nervous about Pantherleap and the whole fiasco with him as well as his injuries, nervous about the rogues and their attacks, nervous about Willowdapple and the possibility that someone could find out about her kits, nervous about his injuries, because if they didn't heal, then what use was he to the Clan, and they'd surely kick him out if his secret got out...

My secret.

As he thought about it, the 'secret' was more so just him hiding from something. He knew that he had to ignore it and press it away as much as he could, but it felt like it had always been a part of him, but he'd only just realized it now. He didn't like the thought that it had always been a part of him. *I don't like it. Make it go away.*

His head frequently filled up with the words at the concept that he liked toms. He didn't *want* to like toms, and he really didn't want to like Pantherleap. He wasn't allowed to and he really should have control over it. But he *didn't* and he'd completely messed up in telling the other tom both things. And apparently, Cougarstar's brother had been breaking the rules all along.

And then he walked right into Pantherleap.

Pulling backward with shock flickering within his gaze, he quickly surveyed his surroundings. He walked all the way back to camp without even noticing and the warrior was at the entrance.

Pantherleap looked back at him and appeared to ensure his gaze was guarded. Shame quickly swamped Adderheart but he flicked his tail at Pantherleap as if indicating that the tom should follow. He seemed to consider it for a moment before giving a strained "I can't".

"Why not?" He hissed in response, though he wasn't meaning to be rude. He just didn't want anyone to hear. "Come on Pantherleap... I know you don't want to talk. But we have to."

"I just told Cougarstar I was going hunting!" He protested.

"Then we can go together! StarClan, come on... just, please. We have to talk."

"It's really going to seem awfully suspicious if we disappear," he answered, flickering his tail sharply. "And you should be in the healers' den after what happened. That's even *more* suspicious."

Guilt crawled across Adderheart's pelt. "I feel fine," he responded, ear twitching. "I'm practically begging you. Please. We have to talk."

"I'm not talking about it. We don't have to talk. I'm meant to be hunting, I'm not supposed to be chattering idly with some warrior."

Some warrior...?

"I thought that..." Hurt flashed clearly across his face and he wished to StarClan that he could erase it.

"Sorry. Sorry. You know what I mean. I just can't really talk right now. I'm not talking," Pantherleap finalized, shaking his head firmly.

"But we have to!"

"You *want* to," he corrected, glancing back to shoot Adderheart a guarded look. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Then we don't have to," Adderheart pleaded.

"That's the entire reason you want to 'go hunting' with me!"

He opened his jaws to speak but then closed them. *He's right. I just want help. He knows how to deal with this, doesn't he? I hope he does. That's why I want to talk to him!... and to clear things up. Obviously! Just talk to me!*

"See? I told you!" Pantherleap started to pad into the camp, but Adderheart slammed his paw down on his tail, and the warrior muffled a cry.

"Pantherleap, seriously? Stop it and talk to me! Y-you can't just leave because you've never had feelings returned. I need help! I don't know what to do!"

The tom turned back, his gaze now finally unguarded to reveal that he was... hurt? "Do you think *I* know what to do? I've never had this happen before. It's not allowed! It's not allowed! I don't know what to do either! I don't know. I won't and don't know. I don't want to go 'hunting' with you right now!"

Did I do something wrong? Why does he look so hurt? What did I do? Guilt and shame layered on Adderheart like snow falling from the sky onto a pleasantly dry ground.

"Adderheart, I don't know any better than you do. But I'm meant to be hunting. We can't discuss now." His voice had quieted momentarily, but his ears still flickered, and his voice was still clearly strained.

"Discuss what?"

A string of expletives filled his head.

Cougarstar.

The large-bodied tom swept over with his tail flickering behind him, appearing to be proud and confident for no reason other than that was how he was. The leader looked down upon him and Adderheart went stiff, his throat quickly closing. Anxiety stirred deep in his belly, awakening the storm of worry that was sure to consume him in the following moments.

He looked down to Adderheart and then back to Pantherleap, and although barely a moment had passed, he prompted his brother with a nudge. "Hm? Discuss what?" His voice was slick like honey, but it certainly didn't carry the sweetness of the yellowy-golden substance.

"The rogues," Pantherleap replied smoothly, glancing upward toward his brother with a simple gaze. He had expertly cleared the hurt and guardedness from it, replacing it with simplicity. Adderheart attempted to copy it, though it looked like a badly recreated art piece.

That wasn't a good idea. I thought you'd of heard the rumors by now. He's going to ask me *about what happened, unless he's sure it's the rogues.* His fur prickled uncomfortably and he pressed his paws against the ground as if to keep him glued there. *I hope he does. But I also hope he doesn't.*

"The ones that attacked you?" Cougarstar questioned, looking to Adderheart.

"Yes," Pantherleap answered, his tail flickering momentarily. "I've got to go hunting, though I—"

"Why don't you go together?" Cougarstar offered, glancing at them both as if it was a stupidly obvious decision.

"Because Adderheart has to be in the healers' den," Pantherleap explained, "and I'm sure that the healers wouldn't want their patient disappearing."

Adderheart shifted uncomfortably. Cougarstar was sure to get angry that Pantherleap was just speaking for him, but he felt as though he couldn't talk. His throat was all dry, like a desert, and it felt as though he was simply unable to speak to anyone.

"Why don't you go tell them, Adderheart?" Cougarstar queried. "We'll wait here."

Mutedly, he nodded and headed off to the healers' den. As he approached the entrance, he cleared his throat and tried to quell the absent flickering of his tail. His whiskers flicked sharply, but he pushed himself forward.

"Coalbelly?" He prompted, voice drifting lightly into the den. The dark-furred she-cat appeared moments later, rubbing her eyes with the back of her paw.

She reared back. "Why do you smell like kits?" She demanded, alarmed.

"I v-visited Willowdapple," he stammered. "I didn't know that was an issue...?"

"Good," she mewed decisively, tail flickering. "It's not. Now, what do you want?"

"Cougarstar wants me to go on a hunt with Pantherleap."

The she-cat's brown eyes suddenly blazed, but she was quick to cover them up. Adderheart remembered the time in which Pantherleap had mentioned 'meetings' that the healers, deputy, heir, mates of such, and Pantherleap had been invited to.

And Coalbelly was the one who would rise against Cougarstar at times. So that means—

"Well, you can't go on a hunt. You still have to recover, I didn't even know that you were awake. Tell him I said no," she instructed him.

"But he wants me to go—"

"Well, that's too bad. Get me if he disagrees."

Adderheart couldn't believe this. *How am I supposed to tell him that she said* no? *I'm not the right cat for this. Why doesn't she just go out herself?* He stood, transfixed in his position, limbs locked by fear.

"What're you doing? Go on," she called over her shoulder, as the she-cat had disappeared into the back of the den.

Stiffly, the pale warrior headed out of the den. As promised, Cougarstar and Pantherleap were still where they had been originally. The former was chattering quietly, fiercely apparently, for the leader's green gaze bore into his brother's similar one. Adderheart began to tremble, but he quickly strolled over, trying to hide his figure's shaking.

"What'd she say?" Pantherleap asked immediately, appearing to have cut off his brother. Cougarstar glanced at Adderheart, and he rolled his eyes, looking back to the camp's entrance.

"She said that I should be resting."

Silence momentarily settled down among the three cats, squeezing in between every little area that it could reach. It was hot and searing, though nobody else seemed to notice. Uncomfortably, Adderheart shifted, swallowing anxiously as he let his tail rest against the ground as if to ensure it didn't flicker back and forth so excessively.

"What? That's not true. You've got to be supporting the Clan!" Cougarstar exclaimed, looking to Pantherleap as if to search for the tom's agreement. However, the tawny tom said nothing.

Adderheart spun on his paw and Cougarstar shouted, "Get back here!"

"She told me to get her if you disagreed," he explained, tossing the words over his shoulder. Cougarstar stomped his paw against the ground but Adderheart continued, quickly headed for the healers' den.

He slipped in, letting his head duck as he peeked in. He was scared. He didn't want to get yelled at and he wasn't about to get scolded

for something that wasn't his fault. He didn't need to say a word though, because the she-cat had heard his pawsteps and swiftly headed out to meet him.

"He said no?" She guessed, and he nodded. Huffing, she pushed past him, and he was quick to turn and pad swiftly after her.

"He has to go hunting," Cougarstar asserted instantly. The large tom quickly padded over to her and hung over her as if to assert dominance. Adderheart shifted and moved backward.

"But he has to rest. What if he gets attacked by rogues again?"

"He has another warrior with him," Cougarstar snapped, turning back to Pantherleap. "You'll protect him, won't you?"

Pantherleap nodded silently, not speaking a word. Anxiety stirred deep within Adderheart's belly at the response. He knew it was true, but Cougarstar didn't know about what had occurred before the current situation.

"But he can't just go out," Coalbelly responded sharply. "He's injured. He's not allowed to just leave whenever he wants to."

"Pantherleap's going to be with him." Cougarstar glowered at the she-cat, seeming to hold anger deep within the green depths of his gaze. He didn't back down, rather just continued to move forward, and his claws even momentarily unsheathed.

"Cut it out," she snapped.

"Don't snap at me!" He warned fiercely, lifting a paw. The dark-furred healer lifted one of hers up in response, not saying a word as she pushed back his.

She looked up to him. "You wouldn't hurt a healer."

"I can if I want!" He shouted. "Don't question me!" His lips were drawn back in a furious snarl, his tawny fur puffed up. Pantherleap, behind him, shifted uncomfortably on his paws, unsure of what to do or say. Adderheart was behind Coalbelly, in a similar situation.

Though the two were swapped. Pantherleap, from the beginning, was meant to be on Cougarstar's side, and he always had been. That was how it was for him. And from the beginning, or rather since recently, Adderheart was against Cougarstar and on the side of anyone who was, too. And apparently, that was Coalbelly. At least, for the time being.

Adderheart's tail flicked sharply. *He won't hurt a healer, would he?* As much as he thought he doubted it... it was always a possibility. Ever since the situation with the tom and his mate, anything was possible. And that should've scared him. But it was just something else to get used to. Something else that had slowly shifted into a schedule that everyone had grown used to underneath Cougarstar's rule.

"You wouldn't," she claimed once more. Despite the fact that a much larger tom was practically hovering over her, she was strong and calm, standing still with her head tipped up to stare at him. Her brown gaze was stuck upon his own.

"You're right, I wouldn't. But I'm the leader of this Clan, and my word is final," he snarled fiercely, appearing to be angry at her, but also angry at the fact that she had won. *Good. He shouldn't hurt anyone, but healers deserve respect.*

"And I'm a healer of this Clan, and the members of this Clan depend on me for the correct decisions about their health. Your word is final on the Clan, but mine is final regarding health," she replied easily back, the words slipping from her maw with ease.

"It doesn't matter! Health doesn't matter!" He spat, whirling away from her in his fury. "Go hunting, you two," he ordered, whipping to face Pantherleap and Adderheart. "Go hunting right now!"

Coalbelly's gaze quickly darted to Adderheart's, silently pleading and asking for him not to go. For him to stay within the den, and he could see promises written in her gaze and scrawled on her features; she'd keep him safe if he said no. She'd keep Pantherleap safe if he said no. She'd do anything, *anything* to get him to say no.

His heart and mind screamed at him. *Say no! Turn around and stand*

beside her! His limbs ached to move just the tiniest bit toward the she-cat, toward the rebellion he'd prayed and hoped for, toward the safety and calmness that he and his Clanmates deserved... toward a world without Cougarstar as a leader.

But it was also the world of terror and of blood. Of lives of uncountable numbers lost, and of battles fought over hundreds and hundreds of days. If there was ever to be a rebellion, it would kill *everyone* in the Clan and in the end, Cougarstar would still rise victorious. He would fight every single cat in the world to gain that power.

Despite everything pulling him in the opposite direction, Adderheart stepped toward Pantherleap and toward the camp entrance. In that moment, he saw Coalbelly practically slump against the ground, defeated. He sent her an apologetic gaze, though he was swift to wipe it, and Cougarstar stalked over to the healer.

Before he could see what happened, Pantherleap tugged fiercely on his tail, and then the two were running side by side, away from the camp, and away from Cougarstar.

chapter twenty eight

Adderheart realized too late that he had no idea how to bring things up.

He'd spent all that time trying to get Pantherleap to go with him that now he had no idea what he was meant to do with the tom. *How are we supposed to sort things out? I don't... I can't talk to him about it, this was a mistake. Fox-dung.*

The urge to turn around grew as strong as a river, but he pressed on. Despite the fact that he would've wished himself elsewhere, his pelt was warm, and his face was somewhat guarded to hide the flushed emotions that were rising quickly inside of him. Jerking too far to the side, his pelt brushed Pantherleap's, and both of them pulled away. Fear sparked deep within him. *What if he doesn't like me at all?*

His fur prickled but he didn't want to touch the tom again. It felt wrong, like some sort of lava spread between them at every minor touch. He wasn't allowed to touch Pantherleap; it was just like the elders from before, and the spark grew to a small blaze. But he just shoved it down and away. He had to keep running.

Suddenly, Pantherleap stopped in a random clearing. The pine trees rose tall, waving pleasantly up at the sky above their heads, and the rocks below tried to join in on the conversation. Adderheart pulled himself to a stop, looking to Pantherleap. *Please start the conversation. Please don't make me do it.*

"So, what're we here to talk about?" He prompted.

"Really?" He accidentally said aloud. "You know better than I do."

"I don't," he answered.

"Well, what're we supposed to do?" Adderheart asked quietly, sitting down. Pantherleap had already done so, his tail wrapped brusquely

over his paws.

"Hide it," he answered simply with a shrug. "We can't love each other, Adderheart."

"But we do," he insisted, rising to his paws. His dark gray eyes were shiny as they swept over to meet Pantherleap's own green eyes. Quickly, the other tom diverted his gaze as he continued, "it's not something that's controllable." The words were true, as much as he hated them.

"We can't," Pantherleap replied, softer this time, shaking his head as he backed up. Adderheart took a step forward, his paws placed delicately upon the ground. "It's not allowed," he repeated again.

"Pantherleap, it's not fair," he continued, taking another step forward. He was only a couple mouse-lengths from the other warrior, and at a similar level. His heart beat faster and faster, his skin crawling. "We have to do something."

"And what do you suggest that would be...?" Pantherleap breathed, kneading his paws into the ground beneath them. Adderheart realized he was trying to look *away* from him.

"I don't know. But I know that I do... I want to be your mate."

Pantherleap went silent as Adderheart stepped forward once more. His legs were shaking and his tail was too, and despite the fact that he wished it would stop, Adderheart knew it was just doomed to be like that forever. Everything was caused and everything was impacted by the shaking it seemed, for Pantherleap went still for a moment as if to consider what to do.

Adderheart moved the tiniest bit closer, his throat closing momentarily, but he shoved every apprehension he'd ever had away. This choice was up to Pantherleap and only Pantherleap. *It's not my fault. I'm okay. Just wait. Just wait.* He told himself, trying to stop his trembling. *I can't. I can't do this, I can't like toms, I need to get away— why am I doing this, this is against the code, if Cougarstar sees —*

Carefully, Pantherleap let his muzzle drift to Adderheart's, and the two touched noses.

Between them, it felt like a million colors had bloomed. Flowers of red, orange, yellow, all equally spreading and blooming to capsule the two instantly appeared. Roses of blue and violet spread next, daisies of lime popping between their paws and linking them together. Heat and warmth created a bubble around them, protecting them from the cold breeze.

At first, neither moved. Their muzzles were practically glued together, but with some pinkish substance that was invisible to both. It was love, of course, sparkly and pleasant. It didn't need to be between a she-cat and a tom specifically, for it was love and it was uncontrollable. If it was between two toms, then that was what it was meant to be.

Pantherleap gently pulled away first, his muzzle having stretched into a flustered yet small and unsure smile. Adderheart opened his eyes, meeting the tom's gaze, and he carefully approached Pantherleap, sitting down next to him.

The larger tom wrapped his tail around Adderheart, pressing against him, and as their fur brushed, Adderheart felt his skin prickle. It wasn't an uncomfortable prickle, in fact, it was the opposite. It made his fur all heated, though, but he did press back against Pantherleap.

He didn't know how to sort through his emotions. Most of him were just pleasantly happy, floating upon a place where nothing could possibly be wrong with what was going on, but a small corner of him was protesting and screaming. It was thrashing around, trying to grow bigger to control his thoughts with fear and terror.

And somehow, it managed to gain more and more followers, and despite the warmth surrounding him, he began to shake with fear. *What if someone finds out? What if he's faking it? What if I'm faking it? What if this is all just fake?*

He tore away from Pantherleap, who let out a half-whimper of confusion. Adderheart felt like his heart had been ripped out as he

moved away, but his brain and his head were screaming at him too loudly. It was all too loud, suddenly, with the brightness of the world around him intensifying by the moment.

"P-Pantherleap, we c-c-can't..." he stuttered, trying to force the words out through his maw that felt like a whole mess of water. It was like he was speaking underwater, and someone was drowning him at the same time. Everything was suddenly moving too fast, like the river had sped up without any sort of warning.

Pantherleap rose to his paws and Adderheart fell to the ground, trying to pull himself into a sitting position.

"We c-can't, we can't... I'm t-taking advantage of you... th-this isn't all-allowed, P-Pantherleap, I'm s-sorry..." he hiccupped again, squeezing his eyes shut. The river tugged him along, screaming and shaking his figure as it tumbled by.

And then tawny fur surrounded him once more, polite and brushing calmly against his own pelt. Warmth once more crawled upon his figure but it was soon overtaken by chills and the cold. Soft breath stirred in his ear, carrying a few simple words.

"You're going to be okay."

They were repeated a few times, as if to solidify the idea within his mind.

Over time, his figure seemed to grow less and less tense. His shoulders lowered for a moment, though his eyes were still squeezed shut as if to block out the feeling that someone was watching. Though, as the words were repeated, he seemed to lose that notion.

It was as if he and Pantherleap were the only cats in the entire world. They were the only cats that mattered and the only ones that would ever matter. Nobody else could even come close to them; they were surrounded in a bubble of warmth and love that was unpoppable. Cougarstar's stupid rules were stupid and useless, and they couldn't even touch the two toms.

When Pantherleap gently stepped away and the words stopped escaping his maw, Adderheart allowed his eyes to open, and there he stood. His eyes were soft and gentle, as if their green depths could simply race from their place upon his face and cradle Adderheart in warm and comforting arms.

He didn't know what to say, but he soon found that he didn't need to. Unspoken words and phrases fluttered between the two like a pair of doves, flying in and out of existence on a pleasantly warm breeze. His gray eyes flicked up to meet Pantherleap's, and he fell in love with the warrior all over again.

"I love you," he breathed, the words flitting on the words of the dove's wings to Pantherleap.

And then the tawny tom was racing toward him, letting out a happy and gleeful exclamation of no words — not that it needed any — and he swept up Adderheart. He knew that he wasn't actually being lifted, as Pantherleap was simply dragging him up to his paws so they could whirl momentarily around, but his heart soared higher than the clouds could ever.

As they whirled in a mild circle together, Pantherleap had drastically lowered his tone, though a deep and rumbly purr rose within the back of his throat. "I love you too."

Adderheart, without even realizing it, was quick to mirror the purr, and it rose powerfully within his chest, quickly rising and pressing at his muzzle. No doubt was present now, and so he let it escape his maw with no hesitation.

They didn't need to say it. They knew it was true; it always had been, even when it had been rough when they'd first told each other. It had been hard to figure out, and even though he was so happy now, Adderheart knew it still wouldn't be easy. And he knew that Pantherleap knew that too.

But they had each other.

I have a mate.

They stood, purring, embracing, close to each other, relishing the true warmth of the other's pelt, adoring the true beauty of the situation that had bloomed within only a moment or two of time for a few moments more until seemingly both of them pulled away at the same time.

The warmth was still present though slightly dulled down, it was still present, and that was all that mattered. It was light and swirling, slightly edging against both of the cats' pelts, but it slowly faded away with time, growing less and less prominent, and Adderheart watched as Pantherleap sniffed the air momentarily.

"I think there's something nearby," he mewed, and Adderheart felt as though he should've been less surprised, but he wasn't. The change in the tom's tone was drastic, as if he had leaped from one polar pole to the other. It was simple, basic, matter-of-fact, though it still carried that sweetness that he always carried within his tone.

He cleared his throat and let his head dip in a nod. "I agree," he replied, voice as even as controlled as ever. It felt wrong to mask it all up, to box it all up within himself once more, but he told himself that it was for the best.

His partner quickly skittered off in that direction, his speed picking up with each moment. Adderheart was swift to follow, ears flickering.

Suddenly, Pantherleap pulled himself to a stop and he narrowed his eyes at where the creature was. He peeked out from behind Pantherleap and spotted the squirrel at the base of the tree. Apparently, the two had moved too quickly, for it leapt up the tree and glared down at them from one of the lower branches.

Pine needles were all around it, and it looked as though it was going to be impossible for either tom to get up into the tree. It wouldn't be impossible, but it would very likely scare off the mouse instantly. Pantherleap quietly began to circle the tree, his claws unsheathing.

Adderheart looked to him as if for instruction, but the senior warrior was simply circling the tree. It appeared as though the

squirrel was watching both of them with a sharp gaze, though it probably was more focused on Pantherleap.

However, the tom was quick to realize the plan. Carefully, Adderheart glanced to a nearby tree and with a swift motion, he headed for another tree nearby. *If I can climb this and then scare the mouse away and down toward the circling Pantherleap, all should be good.*

But he was also perfectly aware of the fact that he wasn't a great climber. All the other times that he'd tried to climb a tree, things hadn't gone so well. Generally speaking, he wasn't a bad hunter at all, in fact, he was a rather good one. But when it came to birds and creatures up in trees... all of his skill had disappeared.

Nervousness sparked within him, and he carefully backed up. He shook his head rapidly as he looked to Pantherleap, and the tom stopped, confused. He seemed to ask what was going on, and Adderheart began to circle the tree. He glanced up and found that the squirrel was still focused on Pantherleap.

Though its focus soon swapped to Adderheart, and Pantherleap carefully headed away. Adderheart continued to pace at the base of the tree, wondering if his decision was the right one. He traced over his mate's skills within his mind and he kept going, despite wanting to stop from a surprised jolt.

Pantherleap's not good at climbing either. How did I forget?

His ears flicked back and forth but he still continued to pace at the base of the tree. He glanced upward and found that the squirrel was *still* following him with its beady little black eyes. He wondered absently what the creature thought was going on, though he glanced away to try and locate Pantherleap.

The tom was struggling to get a nearby tree, his claws sinking uselessly into the bark beneath his tawny pelt. A frown fought its way onto his muzzle but he quickly let it dissipate. *He's trying, and that's what matters. I couldn't do any better,* he told himself. He watched, still circling, as the tom managed to get up onto the first branch with a lot of trouble.

After he watched Pantherleap get onto the first branch, it was a similar process with the next couple. He tried to haul himself up, but he was simply not able to get up onto the next branch. He eventually just sprung up onto the bark, sinking his claws in, and he shuffled onto a branch. He was growing further and further away from the ground.

Eventually, he got high up enough that he was able to lightly balance and spring to the tree nearby. He was a little bit above the squirrel, and Adderheart only could hope that the tom would be able to scare it down and not fall. Pantherleap wobbled momentarily as he headed out onto the thinner part of the branch, his eyes narrowing.

With a swift motion, the tawny-furred warrior launched himself from tree-to-tree, and as much as he wanted to see what happened, Adderheart's vision was quickly blocked by the swath of pine needles in the way. With his gaze quickly switching back to the squirrel, he spotted it leaping down the tree, squealing in fear.

Without a second thought, Adderheart instantly vaulted up, unsheathing his claws as he swiped in the air. As he felt something hit his paw, he looked up, only to find that it had been a pine needle and the squirrel had sprinted past him. He swallowed a curse and quickly whipped around, launching after the little furry creature.

Luckily, he was fairly quick. Slamming his paws in what seemed like an endless motion against the ground, he eventually caught up and was swift to put it out of its misery. Behind him, he heard the pitter-patter of Pantherleap's pawsteps.

He quickly padded up beside him and nodded at the creature. "Good job," he praised, ears flickering. "Do you think that's all we should get?"

"Yeah, I do," Adderheart answered, lifting the squirrel up to clasp it between his jaws. "If we see anything on the way back, we'll get it."

"The prey's not as active as it used to be," Pantherleap commented, padding in the direction of camp.

"Because leaf-bare's going to be early," Adderheart reasoned. "I can already tell that it's going to be, and I think that's why the rogues are so early."

"The rogues," he breathed. "I'd forgotten. What if we get back and there's been another attack?"

"There won't be," he murmured. "They're probably healing, too."

"But what if there is...? Do we know for sure?"

"There won't," Adderheart added softly, letting his tail drift over the tom's back. Pantherleap shifted upon the touch and Adderheart blurted, "Sorry, sorry, I didn't..."

Pantherleap shook his head. "It's okay," he mumbled, pressing against him. "Just be careful when we get back to camp."

And with that, the two spotted the camp's entrance rising in the distance. A comfortable and light silence settled between them, though it couldn't keep the swarm of anxiety out of Adderheart's head. As they headed for the entrance, he took a deep breath.

Stepping away from Pantherleap, he carefully headed in.

chapter twenty nine

Everything after that day had sort of been a blur.

A couple days had passed, and each one was a mix of lies and rogues. They were stealing prey at the borders more and more often, and blood was often found spattered across the borders. It wasn't a pleasant sight, though Adderheart hadn't seen any of it. He'd only gotten bits and pieces of gossip from Pantherleap, and surprisingly, Willowdapple.

He and the she-cat talked more frequently now. Because he woke so early on most days, he went to her and brought her some prey along with some conversation starters. Nobody else really visited her, and he could easily see how she got lonely. She never asked about the kits, and she never asked about what happened to them. She seemed to have forgotten completely.

Which, really, he took as a good thing. The first morning he'd gone to her hadn't been great; the worry before it had been strong. He'd not been sure of what he was going to say if she asked about it, and eventually, he just settled on a lie. It hadn't been one he'd needed to say, of course, but it had still felt wrong.

He'd not yet spoken to Finchpaw yet, but he really wanted to. He'd been thinking of it for the past couple quarter moons, yet hadn't spoken to her at all. He had to talk to her after the whole situation with him in the healers' den, and he had to talk to her after the mid-assessments. He hadn't even figured out what had happened with those yet. And all the while, he was kind of trying to avoid Pantherleap.

There weren't many ways that he could be around him and not feel extremely guilty or horrible. It was like a storm, one that hadn't yet arrived, but was clearly there and hanging precariously over a world of pleasantness. Though, he knew that the storm had already come, and there was no need to worry over it. But he did have to be careful around Pantherleap. Very careful.

They had yet to be assigned a patrol together with another cat, but Adderheart could tell that the day was coming soon. It was simply within the air, clear and fresh like words upon a newly printed page. Nobody had figured it out, yet, though, which was definitely a good sign. He had to tell himself near daily that he and his mate wouldn't end up like the elders.

The patrol that he'd been assigned yesterday had been awful. Poppyfur and Galewind were both on it — two of three siblings to Brindlebreeze — and the latter was miserable the entire time. Because it had been a border patrol, Marigoldcry, who'd lead the patrol, had lead them right toward where the battle had been. Adderheart'd been furious at her, though there wasn't much he could do.

Galewind had essentially gone quiet. He spoke no words, and if he did, they were minimal, perhaps two or three words if one got lucky. He looked at his paws pretty much all the time, and he never spoke of his sister. It seemed as though he was trying to ignore the fact that she had ever existed, though Poppyfur wasn't quite the same.

She was trying to ignore it, too, but it was a different kind of ignoring. She just pretended that they'd never *had* a sister in the first place. She was still as bouncy as ever, maybe even more so, trying to ignore her and pretend she'd never existed. Adderheart hadn't seen Birdwish, the final sibling of the now broken four, around so far, but he figured she was dealing with it normally.

He felt bad. He knew exactly how Brindlebreeze had died, and so did Pantherleap, yet neither could tell in fear of death falling upon them. Pantherleap had yet to spill many secrets about Cougarstar's leadership, though Adderheart could see them in his gaze and in his movements around the tom. The arguments of the high-ranks had grown more frequent once more.

Every single time that he passed by the leader's den and there were cats inside, it was essentially a guarantee that they'd be arguing. Loud hisses came from within the den, and although the words they carried were ones he didn't hear, he didn't need to hear the words. The action was venomous as it was, rude and sharp.

He didn't know what they were fighting about and Pantherleap wouldn't tell him, but he thought it was about the rogues. His injuries had finally cleared up, enough so that he was allowed to be on a patrol without Coalbelly and Cougarstar screaming at each other. Though, leaf-bare had finally settled in, so that likely spurred conversations, or rather arguments, about prey.

It had been incredibly cold the past couple days, so when it snowed, nobody was surprised.

Padding out of the warrior's den, he pulled back instantly, tail flickering sharply. He'd seen snow before, obviously, but every time that it newly fell, it was like he was seeing it for the first time again. It was cold and sharp, yet warm in the sense that it blanketed the entire world within its icy claws. He carefully exited the den and picked his way toward the fresh-kill pile.

It was empty, to his shock. Quickly, he pivoted upon his paw and turned to the camp entrance, before pausing and looking at the snow. *Should I try to move some of this?* He wondered, hopping momentarily to get his pale paws out of the chilly snow.

With a decisive motion, he began to clear the snow. He started by making lines of snowlessness from each den to the exit, and then he expanded the lines. He wondered if he should connect the lines to the fresh-kill pile, but eventually decided it useless. However, the lines he was making wouldn't stay forever, as more of the little white speckles covered the ground soon enough.

He tried to work quicker to ensure that the camp would be mostly free of snow, but it was getting so high that the lines were looking more like a walkway between some tall trees. The snow was rising and rising, rising higher than how tall *he* was, which would definitely be an issue if the sun never came out to melt it. He thought of the forest and the prey that was likely hiding.

Today might be hard.

It didn't take a genius to know that. Only Willowdapple and the high-ranks would get prey, and the rest would be forced to share. Adderheart's tail flickered sharply. *I have to get prey soon, or they're*

all gonna be gone. The sooner we go, the better.

With a swift motion, he quickly headed for the apprentice's den and peeked his head in. All of them were sleeping still, flanks rising and falling at even pace. An icy breeze skipped around the den and he shivered, wondering how they'd not woken from the chill. He entered carefully, surveying each of them, before lightly poking Finchpaw.

She sat up, startled, gaze hurriedly traveling the den before it landed on the warrior. She, confused, looked up to him, head tipping silently. His tail flicked at the entrance of the den before her eyes widened with concern, and within a moment the she-cat was leaping up and sprinting out.

He quickly dashed after her, ears flickering as she stared out at the snowy world. She looked to him, concern flashing brightly through her green eyes. The snow from earlier that had risen taller and taller around the cleared lanes were even taller than before, appearing as if they were simply just snowy walls. The area that had been cleared had a layer of snow on it, too.

"What're we going to do?" She asked, carefully picking her way around the snow walls before stopping and looking back to him, suspicious. "Why'd you wake me up?"

"Hunting?" He offered, a spark of anxiety lighting within him.

"When did you want to be around me?" She questioned, though not in a rude way, simply curious and inquisitive. However, her eyes were slightly sharp, as if she was suspicious of him.

"Well, I... you were around, for the incident with me in the medicine cat's den."

She went silent, appearing to have nothing else to say, her ears sharply flickering.

"And I never figured out what happened during the mid-assessment... and I feel bad for just kind of ignoring you."

"You didn't *really* ignore me, but if you wanna go hunting we can!"

Finchpaw replied, ears flickering as she glanced around. "But how are we supposed to get out of camp?"

Carefully, he flicked his tail at her as if to indicate that she could follow, and she quickly headed after him as he headed through the... well, it was like a hallway or a cave of sorts, except there was no roof unless the snow counted. It continued to fall and fall, growing colder and icier by the moment, and Adderheart hurriedly shuffled through it to the entrance.

"If we're fast enough, we'll be fine," he offered, stepping through the entrance and out into the snowy world.

The snow had risen taller than he'd ever expected, and truly, he was unsure if it had ever been higher. It appeared to simply be taller than the trees, reaching to the dark and somewhat cloudy sky with long and well-built arms, fingers stretching up and up as if trying to ruin the sky.

It was as cold as ever, appearing as if leaf-bare had leapt in and clasped the Clan tightly. The wind around was icy, and it caused the cats around to shiver, yet it didn't seem to get toward the camp. Luckily, the fact that it was in a little dip in the ground made it so that the wind skimped right over it.

However, this also meant that once Adderheart and Finchpaw had left the camp, they could see into the camp, and it looked like the snow was rising taller than the ground nearby. The snow-walls were rising too tall, taller than where they were standing. So when they turned back to look at the territory, it was almost scarier.

The trees had tons of trees upon their spindly features, and the concept of pine needles seemed to not exist. The snow was covering the trees and even making them lean down, so that their millions of branches tipped down under the weight of the snow. And this only made the trees lean and wave uncomfortably as if threatening to fall.

This, in turn, caused the snow from the trees to fall off and onto the already snow-clad ground. At some parts, the snowdrifts were larger and taller than the trees, peeking over the tips of the pointy tops of

the trees. At least, what used to be the trees, for now, they were simply just snow, and that likely meant that the creatures would either be dead or scampering around, hiding in the snow.

From behind him, he heard the soft gasp of Finchpaw, somewhat startled yet possibly even afraid of the world around them. It was scary, he admitted it. Well, everything was sort of scary, for if he even said one wrong word, the entire world he lived in could be as ruined as the trees that were drooping down from the snow atop them.

He quickly forced thoughts out of his mind, looking around at the territory with a sharp gray gaze. He had to catch prey, so he could prove to the Clan that he was doing fine. Despite all the issues he'd had with panicking randomly, despite all the comments that had been made about him, despite Willowdapple's former anger and Streamfang's irritation with him... he was doing okay and could provide for the Clan.

Turning back to the apprentice, he shifted momentarily and then his ears flicked sharply. "Where do you think we should go first?"

"I'm not sure, but let's see!" She chirped, and with that, the she-cat dashed off.

After they eventually reached a clearing of snow, Adderheart quickly reeled back and looked behind them. A long and zig-zagging line of pawsteps led the way to where they were now, and he sniffed quickly, shaking out his pelt. As they'd ran, the snow had quickly sprung to stick to their pelts, and the smaller she-cat was shivering.

She shook out her pelt, too, glancing around curiously. She appeared to scent the icy leaf-bare air, but she frustratedly screwed up her muzzle as she looked back around. Her tail flickered back and forth as she poked around the clearing a bit, pressing her paw past the top layer of snow that just kept on growing.

"What should we go for? Burrows?" He prompted.

"Burrows will be covered, making it hard to get air, and anything

inside is probably dead," she replied, ears twitching. "But hunting aboveground is going to be impossible, so I think burrows are what we need to look for after all. Scenting them is going to be difficult," she added.

He nodded, and for some reason, he was proud. He knew that this likely just came from her being realistic, but it seemed as though she was ready to be a warrior. *I wonder if she and the rest of the apprentices will be getting their ceremonies early... or if they've already done their assessments.*

He doubted it though, but he turned and sniffed the air, only to realize it would be useless. He found a tree and was quick to dig up some snow nearby it, but found that it was like an endless hole. The snow went on forever and forever, seemingly never-ending, and his muzzle twitched irritably.

Then, an excited call split the clearing.

"I got past the snow!"

Adderheart was quick to pivot upon his paw and turn around, skittering over to where the apprentice was. She'd actually managed to dig low enough that she'd hit the dark grass beneath it, and there was a small hole that looked like a burrow there, too.

He continued to dig out the area around it, hoping that she could try and get her paw into the burrow and snag something within it. Preferably something alive, but he doubted there'd be anything alive in it. Depending on how long they'd been without air, it was likely it was just a bunch of corpses anyway.

With a swift motion, she seemed to lurch downward, and he turned to see her trying to get further and further into the burrow. She had her entire foreleg inside of it, and she was sort of just awkwardly pressed up against the ground. He muffled a laugh, but he watched her in case she'd need help.

After a moment or two of pause, she let out a triumphant exclamation, and she leaned back, pulling up two mice by their tails.

"StarClan! Good job, Finchpaw!" He praised her, looking at the little creatures. Their fur was wet, as if snow had gotten into the burrow, though they were clearly already dead. He brushed a paw over their little pelts to clear it of the dirt that had collected on them.

"Thanks," she mewed brightly in response, taking both of the mice within her jaws. He peered at where she'd been searching, and was able to discover the fact that the tunnel that the mice were in sort of lead away, toward a different tree.

He traced his way over to it and began to dig out the snow, and as soon as Finchpaw had realized what he was doing, she did the same. Luckily, this made the process much quicker, and almost as soon as they had uncovered the snow, a large blur of brownish fur sprung out.

Adderheart quickly leapt backward, though whatever it was hit Finchpaw straight in the muzzle. He cringed as she sneezed and swayed momentarily, and he quickly swiped his paws at the creature, which had just laid awkwardly in the entrance to the burrow. He realized that it was a vole, and its neck was broken. *It must've gotten injured in the burrow, and the pressure probably forced it out.*

"Are you okay?" He questioned, looking to her. She had lifted her paw to her muzzle and sneezed a couple more times, and he felt a little bad for muffling his snickers.

"Yeah, yeah," she commented, rising to her paws with an absent sneeze followed by a laugh as she recollected her prey. "Let's go back."

"Sure," he mewed, grabbing his vole as he rose to his paws and began to pad off. He had difficulty getting back to where their pawsteps had been marked in the snow, and soon enough he realized they were essentially covered up. So, he just decided on walking back based on where they were. At least, where he thought they were.

Finchpaw's pace was fairly happy in general, and he wondered briefly what he should do about all the questions swirling in his

head. He had to ask about her mid-assessment, what had occurred in the healer's den when she'd been there... they all needed answers, yet he didn't want to ruin what had seemed like a good hunting trip.

What if she gets mad at me? He wondered and contemplated telling her because if he didn't, it'd just mean he'd have to do something else like this again. But if he did, he could easily ruin this fairly good hunting trip. They'd actually go into camp with prey, unlike the majority of the patrols. At least, he expected that not many would get prey. His tail flickered sharply as he continued, glancing to the pleased she-cat.

Anxiety sparked within him but he pushed it down, continually walking forward. He wasn't sure what to do, and he knew he had to pick something to do soon. He couldn't just talk to her when they were right outside of camp, as that would simply just be wrong of him to have her explain right next to the cats inside of the camp.

I can't risk that. We've had a good hunting trip. Now shut up and walk.

chapter thirty

As soon as they got back from camp, Adderheart knew everyone was going to be worried.

It was only reasonable for a fairly populated Clan, right? If snow had practically covered every little part of camp and the territory of any Clan, they'd likely be upset, or at least concerned. Though, bigger Clans would have it worse, for the bigger it was, the more cats they had to feed. And only two cats knew that there was a specific way to hunt in the snow.

Now, one likely wouldn't tell a single cat about it, though perhaps he'd tell Pantherleap if the time was right. However, besides that, it was unlikely that anyone would figure out how to hunt from him, and really, he knew this already. He was hoping that the cats of SageClan could figure it out themselves.

And the other, well, Adderheart wasn't exactly sure. He didn't know if Finchpaw would tell someone, and if she did, who would she tell? Maybe she'd spill it to the other apprentices, though the warrior wasn't sure if she would speak to them that much today. Cougarstar probably would send most cats out on hunting patrols, and hopefully soon. If he waited much longer, everything would be dead.

He shook his head to stop himself from continuing to think, as the camp's entrance was finally appearing. The pale tom glanced to Finchpaw, who picked her way carefully over the snow.

When they arrived, Finchpaw headed in first, and he realized with a surprised jolt to his figure that his pathways around camp had been covered with a thicker layer of snow, but the later itself had been compressed down by pawsteps. The walls that surrounded the pathways had been cut down a little, though they were still tall, and although Adderheart could see over them, Finchpaw was having trouble.

Quickly, he made his way to the fresh-kill pile, and he found that near to it, the snow had been mostly cleared. He spotted the highrock too, and the snow around it was essentially nonexistent. The rest of the dens still had snow piling outside of them, and the clouds only growled from above.

"Adderheart? Finchpaw? Where were you?" Marigoldcry's voice split the air, and Adderheart couldn't help but detect a slight edge to her tone. His ears flicked sharply as he turned around to find the she-cat approaching.

You didn't help with a single thing in Finchpaw's training. I *did. You did the mid-assessment, and that's it, so get away.*

Finchpaw turned around and waved her tail to the warrior, expression simple though tinged by anticipation. "Hunting," she answered, and she turned and pointed at the pile. "We found some stuff."

"Really?" She pushed past Adderheart, and he swiftly steadied himself after momentarily losing his balance. The thick-furred warrior spotted the pile and her maw dropped, though she was quick to resolve her expression. "How'd you get this?"

"We hunted," Adderheart cut in before Finchpaw could speak, and he picked up the vole. "Tell Cougarstar that the prey are in the burrows. Anything aboveground will be dead, and if he doesn't send out patrols soon, there won't be anything left."

Marigoldcry cast him a look yet he simply turned away, headed for the nursery.

"Where are you going?" She called, her voice sharp.

Wait. If the rumor has spread that I'm the... no, wait—

Before he could do anything else, she strolled up to him and pressed against him. He wanted to vomit all over her, but she simply pressed tighter, her eyes digging holes into his heart and his mind. He swallowed through a tight throat and he tipped his head.

"Where are you going?" She demanded once more, now leaning

over him.

"I'm going to give this to Bearpatch," he lied, realizing that the place where Bearpatch was likely wasn't in the nursery. Panic quickly leapt up his throat, but he shoved it down. *The more I show my fear, the more she's going to be suspicious.* He was aware of Finchpaw's gaze on him and the she-cat.

"Bearpatch is over there," she said, voice still sharp and almost definitely threatening. He suppressed a shiver and turned, not sure of where she was referring to. "I thought you could see over the snow."

"I can't," he lied, again. He stood up straight and lightly jumped as if to show that he couldn't see over the tops of the snow. He finally spotted Bearpatch and she gave him a sardonic smile. The warrior blinked once, twice, and then he turned and padded off and right to Bearpatch.

"Hello, Adderheart," the tom mewed, looking up from where he'd been shoving away some snow. It was surprising to see the heir actually doing some work, but Adderheart supposed that it made sense. He was panting and huffing for air though, so the pale-furred warrior assumed he was working hard.

Or maybe his lack of work was catching up to him. Overall, Bearpatch didn't seem unhealthy by any means, though he was definitely well-built. Perhaps some had mistaken this as weight, and assumed that he was unhealthy because of it?

Though, he simply laid down the vole in front of the heir, dipping his head. "This is for you," he mewed, trying to keep his voice controlled.

"Thanks," Bearpatch replied, sitting down as he wrapped his tail rather quickly around his paws. He swept the piece of prey closer to his figure. "How'd you get this?" He questioned, glancing up as he took a bite.

"Burrows," the warrior answered, stepping away. He could feel that he was beginning to shake, so he quickly shook out his pelt as if to

cover up his worry. With that, he spun on his paw and prepared to bound away.

"Burrows?"

"Underneath the ground, the prey is still there. Dead or alive, it depends, but it's still there," he explained, glancing over his shoulder. *Can I go yet?*

The dark brown tom's eyes flashed with something like interest. "Really? How'd you find that out?"

"Finchpaw and I were hunting," he answered, and at that moment, he remembered that Bearpatch was Finchpaw's actual mentor. *What if he gets mad at me? For taking his apprentice? He's not said anything in the past about it.* He bit his lip, trying to steady himself.

"Oh?" He prompted. "Is that so? What did you teach her?"

"I didn't teach her anything," he responded carefully, "it was a hunting mission, not a training session. Marigoldcry conducted her mid-assessment, though I don't know what happened on it."

"I take that you've been doing most of her training," he commented, taking a bite of his vole. *Yes. Who doesn't know that?* Adderheart thought as the tom continued, "so why did Marigoldcry do the mid-assessment?"

"I don't know," he replied, swallowing anxiously. *What if he presses it? I don't know. I don't want to tell him that he has to go ask Cougarstar. Unless Cougarstar didn't do the mid-assessments.* No, that didn't make sense. His brain was making up dumb things to try and excuse the worry that spiraled within him.

He pressed his paws against the ground and he glanced to the heir, who was simply just looking around at the snow at a rather slow and almost lazy way. Adderheart's ears flicked rapidly. The tom was just seeming to try to focus on something, but he didn't appear tired. His eyes were fairly bright, though that easily could've been the snow's reflection.

Bearpatch waved a paw as if to dismiss it.

"Do you know what happened during the mid-assessments?" He asked soon after, looking to the heir.

"No," he answered, taking a bite of the prey beneath his figure. "Why?"

Adderheart shifted, ears flickering rather rapidly. "I was hunting and heard some noises and such. Was a little concerning, though I never learned what happened."

Bearpatch shrugged, flipping his paw once more. It appeared as though he was unwilling to speak all that much, and perhaps that was because he was too busy eating. Or perhaps it was because he didn't want to, because he was too lazy to speak. Because he wasn't educated enough on the topic. Maybe because he just didn't know.

His ears flicked rapidly and the warrior dipped his head as if to excuse himself.

Bearpatch looked up. "Where are you going?"

Adderheart didn't really know the answer to the question. He just didn't really want to be there, with the tom who seemed to be critically judging him but also not caring at the same time. It was a strange mix that he didn't like, and he could easily compare it to leaf-bare and greenleaf. Two opposites, each pressing against the other as if to claim territory that didn't exist.

The chill of the clearing suddenly seemed to set in. Adderheart absently shook out his pelt, as snow had collected atop it. He glanced up absently to find that it was *still* snowing. The clouds were still rumbling ahead, and the snow from said clouds drifted down still. The fluffy white substance came down in sheets compared to separated particles, if anything.

"To rest," he lied, turning back to glance over his shoulder at the heir, who had since glanced upward further to look at the warrior. Bearpatch's tail twitched and wrapped around his paws, eyes narrowing almost critically, as if he didn't believe him. *Was I not believable?*

Adderheart's ears flicked rapidly as the tom replied, "So soon?"

"Yes," he answered, struggling to keep his voice under control. "The burrows thing was exhausting, and I'm the one who did all the clearing of this snow."

"Oh?" Bearpatch took a bite of the prey at his paws and looked up as if to prompt the tom to continue.

After swallowing nervously, he explained, "I woke up early on accident, and I decided to clear the snow before it got bad. But it didn't really get better, so I just created walls on accident."

And then Cougarstar strolled over.

"*You* cleared the snow?" He prompted, his gaze cutting slices of Adderheart out and scattering them all over the floor.

He nodded mutely, unable to speak. *Don't say anything that could be construed. Don't do anything that could be taken the wrong way. Be a completely good warrior.*

"You've managed to trap the Clan in camp," Cougarstar commented, venom hidden deep in his tone.

"Finchpaw and I went out and got prey," he answered.

"Oh, really?" Cougarstar prompted, carefully picking his way to stand over Bearpatch. He peered down at the prey with a critically sharp gaze. "I see," he mewed, ears twitching.

Bearpatch said nothing, only nudged the remainder of the piece of prey to the leader.

"Thanks," Cougarstar said flatly, sweeping the prey up. He glanced to Bearpatch. "Come on."

"What?" He asked, standing up immediately.

"We have a meeting," Cougarstar explained, his words long and drawn out as if to turn into knives and slice into Adderheart. "Pantherleap will be there, and so will Sootdawn."

Pantherleap. Why had he mentioned the tom? *Does he know? What if he knows?* Adderheart quickly turned away, tail flickering in the air, and he could almost sense that Cougarstar was staring at him. *Don't.*

He heard a faint whispering and then Bearpatch spoke. "What's it about?"

"The rogues," Cougarstar answered, his voice carefully controlled and made to be crisp yet sharp. It was like a half-dull knife, one that could slice easily through skin yet not one's brain or thoughts. Though Adderheart felt differently. It could easily make him crumble.

"Okay," Bearpatch responded, and he heard a faint *whoosh* of air as if to indicate that he'd picked up the prey. With that, the two toms padded off. Their paws crunched in sync in the cold and chilly snow beneath their paws as they slipped away.

Adderheart tentatively turned around, praying and hoping that they wouldn't be there. If they happened to be there, he'd just turn right back around. In the moment that he lightly moved his figure, panic spurred deep within his belly, however, they weren't there. Silently, he breathed an exhale of relief.

The pale tom glanced around the clearing, briefly debating what to do. He decided that Pantherleap would be too busy with the meeting, so he made a few leaps across the clearing — of course, through the specific areas that he'd unknowingly marked out — and headed for the nursery. *Maybe I can just say hi. I don't have any prey. But I hope she's okay with that.*

Through the entrance to the den, the creamish tom was able to see that Willowdapple was within the den. Her sharp brown eyes were visible, and they were clearly tilted downward as if to look at something or someone within the den. Hopefully her kits, and as this thought crossed his mind, he was reminded of the dead kits that he'd taken.

He was thankful she had yet to say anything about it. Hopefully, that trend would continue, though. He didn't really understand the whole thing in the first place. Though, he did know that grief could

do some crazy things to a cat, particularly a mother whose kits had no father figure. His ears flickered rapidly and he ignored the thoughts rising in his head.

Adderheart stepped in, but Willowdapple was already leaving.

"Willowdapple? Where are you going—?"

She grinned at him before skipping out of the den.

What?

He quickly surveyed the den, anxiety broiling deep within his belly. What could she be doing this early? And why the smile? Was it something he'd done? Or perhaps she was just fetching prey...? Had she already heard of his catches? Though that was unlikely he supposed, but he did know that news traveled fast in SageClan. Who was to say it didn't travel faster than he walked?

The warrior watched as she disappeared, and he managed to catch a half-glimpse of her going toward the *leader's* den. *What is she doing?* He couldn't help but be confused. She'd not told him of this yesterday, or the day before, or the one before that. Was she keeping secrets, and if so, why? His tail tip twitched back and forth as he looked to the den. She peeked her head in, said something, and then bounced off.

"Willowdapple? What's going on?" He called to her, as she was bounding back.

As she approached, she practically rushed into his figure, cuddling up to him. He instinctively sprung away, his fur puffing up, muzzle trying to formulate words, though fear and terror gripped him tightly. *What's going on? What's going on? Why did she do that? What's going on?*

"We're mates!" She announced, twirling around with her tail airily flickering its way under his chin.

What?

He wanted to vomit, right then and there. He wanted to get out and

never go back to her. He never wanted to speak to her again. She did it without telling him? She... they barely knew each other, and Cougarstar had accepted? No wonder he'd been acting so weird. Adderheart wanted to leave. Where was Pantherleap?

He had to talk to him. No secrets. He wanted to get out. He didn't want to be her mate. It wasn't by fault of her own, rather just his. At least, he thought it was. He didn't like her. He just didn't. He liked Pantherleap— well... well...

"Th-that's great," he stuttered, faking a smile as he looked to the she-cat. She appeared too happy to even notice his hesitance, and she rushed to him once more, half-sitting as she snuggled into his figure.

Stiffly, he patted her on the back with his tail. *This feels wrong. This isn't me, I don't like she-cats. I... well, I...* His lip curled at himself, irritation flooding his figure, and she only cuddled closer to him.

"Will you visit our kits?"

No, no, no. They're your kits. Not mine. I didn't father those kits! And Streamfang... she's right. She's wrong. No. This... this can't happen, it won't. Pantherleap's going to be so mad at me and it's not my fault!

"Y-yeah," he stammered, his pale fur still puffed up. Anxiety swarmed him, though he tried his best to keep it out of his gaze and expression. She pressed against him, letting her tail flicker around his own. He lightly curled it around hers, and his figure stiffened.

"I better get going," he said, blinking fiercely. With that, he untangled himself from her and then strolled quickly to the entrance. She waved her tail to him, grinning brightly.

"I love you!" She called, and he sped up, swerving out of the den.

Pantherleap. Please help. Please have a solution.

chapter thirty one

Where is he?

The tom's gaze swept the clearing, trying to peek up and over the snow. He quickly navigated his way through the snow to ensure that he wasn't in the view of his new mate, which he was still trying to understand. *How could have things gone so wrong? Don't you need permission from both sides in order for them to confirm it?*

I can't believe this. This is all my fault. I should've never done anything with Pantherleap, I can't like him and I can't even like Willowdapple. His ears flickered harshly, eyes skimping around the clearing. He quickly headed through a couple of tunnels created by the snow, trying to move faster and faster. Maybe then he could distract himself from his mind.

There weren't tops to the tunnels, but the snow atop them had edged outward, making a small overhang. It was strange, because it had already stopped snowing, and the sun had emerged, leaving it to try and melt all the snow that had been dumped on the world. However, this wasn't an easy feat, obviously. It would take a while.

Adderheart's tail lashed as he surveyed the clearing, of what he could see anyways. There weren't that many cats around, though a few were attempting to clear the tunnels of the snow that had slowly piled back up on the bottom. A couple of cats, particularly Runningfoot and Briargaze, was attempting to try and get rid of the walls although. Though, Antwhisper, who was nearby, was advising against it.

He shivered anxiously, ears twitching back and forth.

"You're getting nowhere, Runningfoot!" Antwhisper called to the warrior, shaking his head as he lifted his paws and licked them rapidly as if to warm them up. Carefully, Adderheart looked to the walls near him, panic quickly climbing within him.

I don't want to clear these walls. If he sees me, he's roping me in. I want to talk to Pantherleap.

"It'll be fine," Briargaze called to the tom.

But what if cats know? We keep on leaving camp alone. We can't keep on doing something that's obviously showing our relationship. But I'm sure he knows that. If he knows it's fine...?

"You two are wasting time," came Antwhisper's tone once more. "You're better off hunting."

"Fine," muttered Runningfoot, and a shuffling of pawsteps could be heard before the sound speeding up and appearing to multiply.

If I leave alone, then cats will think I'm going hunting. But they also already know I've been hunting today and I didn't want to go earlier. What if Bearpatch and—

And at that moment, he recalled why Pantherleap wasn't in the clearing. He recalled why the cats were somewhat subdued, more willing to listen to instructions, at least in the case of Runningfoot and Briargaze. His ears flickered sharply and he swallowed somewhat nervously, letting his tail drift upon the ground, where it flicked back and forth.

There's a high rank meeting.

With his tail flickering back and forth behind him in a rather sharp fashion, the pale-furred warrior glanced to the snow beside him, as if he was considering launching himself through the snowy wall to get to the camp wall.

He wasn't going to crash the meeting. Evidently, that would probably be a bad move, though he did want to speak to Pantherleap, and rather soon. So how could he stick around the camp for long enough that wasn't suspicious to onlookers? That wouldn't get warriors calling for him to help? He could always just sit in the snow, but then he'd catch a chill.

Then I'll just go to the healers.

No, that wouldn't work either. The healers were in the meeting, too, and whenever it ended, he'd just make up a new plan. So his plan just consisted of sitting at the edge of the clearing until the meeting was over? That seemed too easy. It seemed as though something had to go wrong. It was too simple of a plan, too easy to be executed, too easy to happen that *something* had to go wrong.

But right now, it's the only thing I have.

So carefully, he made his way around the many twists of the camp due to the tunnels of snow, edging his way around some of the chilly substance. Eventually, he came along the edge of the clearing but found that it wasn't really cleared away at all. His ears twitched somewhat sharply and he carefully scooped a bit of the snow out, patting it down on the ground.

And just as he was to settle down and wrap his tail around his figure, the meeting ended.

A plethora of hisses and irritable stomps of paws echoed through the clearing as the cats dispersed, and from what he was able to see, the healers immediately darted for their den. Their two dark pelts sprinted from the clearing, starkly different than the white snow around the camp.

Bearpatch appeared not to be upset at all with his mate by his side, and Palewhisker was pleased. Cougarstar and Tinydust were standing within the entrance to the leader's den, looking down on it all. Pantherleap, however, quickly made his way toward the exit and slipped out of it.

Are you serious? Adderheart instantly rose to his paws, almost about to launch himself after the tom, but he quickly pulled back and sunk his claws into the snow beneath his figure. He had to do it strategically. So, logically, the only option was to roll in the snow and cover himself in it. And so that was exactly what the warrior did.

He turned and began to cake himself in snow, hoping that it wouldn't melt. Of course, it did, but not all too quickly, so he was able to work swiftly enough so that he leaped after Pantherleap

soon after, completely disguised by the white substance. After shaking his pelt out, he scented the air and was reminded that snow-covered scents, so he looked down to survey pawprints.

So of course, he launched himself after it, quick to try and get to where the tom was. He hoped he was going in the right way. He wasn't willing to turn around, not again, not after going through all that trouble with his pelt and the snow. It had been mildly cold, though he assumed that if he were to have much longer, it would've gotten a lot colder.

And then, he ran straight into Pantherleap.

He easily toppled to the ground, and Pantherleap quickly pulled himself up to his paws and whipped around. His tail whipped and his eyes were trained carefully on Adderheart, tears blurring the edges of his green gaze.

"Why? Why? I thought you loved me. I thought..." He started, trailing off as he lifted a paw and rapidly rubbed at his gaze with the back of his paw. Adderheart stepped forward, shaking his head, though a strong wave of apprehension rose within him.

This isn't allowed. You can't do this.

He had to stop his lip from curling and he shook his head once more as he spoke, "No, Pantherleap, I do. It's not real, she didn't ask me. She loves me, not the other way around."

"That's not what he said," Pantherleap said, bitterness creeping into his tone. He rocked on his paws for a few moments before seeming to topple over, settling down rather uncertainly against the tree behind him. Adderheart's ears flicked sharply.

"He...? He? What did he say?"

"He said she went to him and told him that you both had agreed."

"I thought you needed both cats to say yes. I didn't say yes, I didn't," Adderheart repeated.

What a mess you're in now, huh?

"Then she lied," he snapped. "Because I know you wouldn't say yes."

"I didn't! I promise!"

"Good. Good." Pantherleap's words were firm and sharp, as if making some sort of command. His figure and posture were as proper as could be, though he slouched and lifted a paw to his head. "Sorry, sorry, I... don't know. I don't know."

"I can't get out of it. I don't know how," Adderheart added. *Maybe you can figure it out. Because I know I can't.*

Pantherleap's ears flickered sharply, anxiety swirling in his gaze, and Adderheart flinched. He wasn't supposed to be the nervous one, but that wasn't the issue. At least, he didn't think it was. They just needed to solve this entire thing.

And continue hiding their relationship, of course. An ever-constant battle, locking the two toms together with their claws permanently unsheathed to protect from lies. And to protect their lies, the ones that they'd spun together, with delicate web that was easy to find but hard to hide.

"What if you stay with her?" Pantherleap mewed softly.

"No, no. No. I can't do that. I'm your mate, I'm meant to be your mate. I can't be with a she-cat when I'm with you," he said instantly, words rushing from his maw like a river that had no rocks to help slow it down. His pelt prickled. *This still isn't allowed. You can turn back. You don't have to do this.* The thoughts pricked sharper at his mind now, and he pressed his paws firmly against the ground.

"I know. I know, we'll be together," Pantherleap assured him quickly. "I mean it... like a cover-up. What if you stay with her to save your reputation?"

"My reputation doesn't need saving," he answered, shaking his head sharply. "I don't want to. I don't..." He trailed off, struggling to the ground as he wrapped his tail around his figure in a half-attempt to comfort himself. Pantherleap lightly trailed over, patting him on the back with his tail as he pressed against his mate.

"Not that it needs saving... just that it could always use a boost. Cougarstar... he wasn't too happy with you."

"What? What did he say?" Adderheart glanced to the tom, lifting a paw to rub violently at his gaze. Little pricks of tears were gathering in the edges of his dark gray gaze and his pelt lifted.

"He said he was pleased you had a mate. But he was talking about the mid-assessments, and he was saying he wasn't happy that you'd taken Finchpaw out for training."

"We didn't... we didn't even train. Bearpatch is supposed to be the one mentoring her, I thought I was doing him a favor...?" He wasn't sure anymore. Adderheart looked back at his paws, ears flickering harshly.

"He's trying to replace you with Marigoldcry. He thinks that the mid-assessments were fine, I don't know what happened on them, but he wants to make all of them warriors *now*."

Adderheart turned to him with sudden confusion. "What? He can't do that, it's only been... it's only been a little more. A moon, I don't know. They aren't old enough, and I know that the other apprentices aren't skilled enough."

"He doesn't care," Pantherleap mewed softly, "he wants new warriors for the rogues, and he wants new apprentices, too."

"What? What rogues? And what...? New apprentices? There aren't any kits old enough."

"They won't leave us alone at the borders. Nobody's been talking about the skirmishes too much because Cougarstar wants to plan an attack on them with the new warriors to show our strength, because he thinks they have a camp," he explained quietly. "He *also* thinks that the elders are with the rogues now. And new apprentices, as in —"

"He can't do that! That's not allowed. He can't just attack them because of the elders, and he can't make Willowdapple's kits apprentices. They're barely one moon, maybe two, I don't know!"

He shook his head fiercely, looking down at his paws.

"He can do whatever he wants to," Pantherleap murmured gravely. "You know that. Even if we don't like it, there's nothing we can do. Tinydust can't stop him, I can't, Bearpatch can't... nobody can."

Adderheart's tail thumped against the ground. "Well, I still don't want to be Willowdapple's mate. I don't want to hurt the elders, and we can just fight off rogues at the borders. We don't need new warriors," he stated firmly.

"He'll make them new warriors anyway. He doesn't care, though I think Coalbelly was ready to claw him when he kept mentioning the kits becoming apprentices; I don't think that's going to happen."

"Then we have to be there for the ceremony. I can't miss Finchpaw's ceremony."

"I don't think it's going to happen today though," Pantherleap commented. "Plus, if you did miss it, I'm sure she'd understand."

"How can you be sure? I want to be there. I'm not going to miss it, come on," Adderheart mewed firmly, rising to his paws with his tail flickering sharply behind him. The thought of missing her ceremony was one that angered him greatly; he'd been the one to do all of her training.

It only made sense for him to go, though the thoughts of the earlier conversation that he and his mate had shared reappeared within his mind. The original purpose of the talk resurfaced and he shoved it down. *I'll deal with it later.*

"You still haven't done anything about Willowdapple," murmured Pantherleap, letting his tail inch close to Adderheart's. Swallowing anxiously, the latter wrapped his tail around the one that'd brushed against it.

"I know," he breathed, shaking his head. "I don't want to be her mate. It's not... I can't... she isn't..."

Pantherleap stayed silent, letting his ears prick momentarily as he looked back to Adderheart.

"She had her kits. The other two of her litter. They were dead, and she... she still had them, as if she was caring for them as she cared for the two alive ones. I don't know why," he suddenly stopped in his blurting speech, pausing to realize what'd he done. "W-wait, no, no..."

"What?" Pantherleap turned to him, head quickly shifting to look at him. "No, it's okay. What are you talking about?"

Adderheart shook his head fiercely, ears flickering sharply as he inched away, and then he quickly inched back. He hadn't... he wasn't supposed to say that. *Come on! Shut up and get away! This is what the entire relationship is going to be like!* His mind roared to life and he shook his head harshly again.

Pantherleap's muzzle twisted momentarily, though it was swift to resolve as the tom pressed against him as if to comfort him. But the feeling of their pelts brushing together made Adderheart feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but it also made it cold and sharp, like ice was breaking them apart.

"She... she... she had all four kits. Whitekit, Snowkit... they were the ones that died. And Featherkit and Stagkit—"

"Vixenfeather and Milkfrost," Pantherleap blurted immediately, turning to face him. "Is she...?"

"No, she's not. Why would... she be my mate then? That doesn't make sense, no. No."

"I know some cats think that while you can like she-cats if you're a tom, you can also like both," Pantherleap mewed shortly after, ears twitching. "Could she...?"

Adderheart paused for a moment, wrapping his tail around his paws. *I can like both? Would cats like me more? Would everyone like me more?* He wondered, ears flickering fiercely. *But I don't* like *she-cats. I like toms.*

His ears continued to twitch back and forth, but his tail was still. The two toms had wrapped their tails around the others, creating a

connection between them that was unbreakable by either of the toms, unless of course, they pulled away. Yet neither did so.

"I don't think she loves me."

"What? How do you know that?" Pantherleap asked, tipping his head gently.

"She... I saw her kits and she thought they were alive. I offered to take them away because we can't have corpses of kits just lying next to her. I don't know, I don't think she was in present day. She was all weird and bouncy, I don't know. I don't think she loves me."

The words easily cut through the air and Pantherleap shifted, ears flickering sharply. Adderheart instantly regretted telling him all about it; it wasn't really his place to explain it, and besides, he didn't think there was any way for him to go back on being her mate. He was stuck, caught between two places that he really didn't want to be.

One was being with Willowdapple. He didn't like she-cats, so it would and could never work, no matter what either of them did. He highly doubted that he was one of those cats who liked she-cats and toms, because he just had never loved a she-cat, and he doubted it would suddenly happen now. And even if it did, it definitely wouldn't be the queen.

And the other was being with Pantherleap. Theoretically, it was the better of the two options, because it meant that he could be with someone that he loved. But it just felt wrong. And they had to keep secrets closely guarded. And they had to hide things from others. And it was just against everything that he'd ever known. *Ever*.

So how was he meant to pick? Adderheart didn't know and to him, it seemed like Pantherleap didn't either. He was caught between two things, and each was pulling him out, stretching him, trying to get him to snap. But simply, he didn't. He just bounced back.

Frustrated, he shook his head fiercely, ears pinning to his skull almost instantly. He didn't know what to do. He shifted closer to Pantherleap, who murmured something comfortingly. He tried to

block out the rising storm within him, and the other tom pressed against him.

"It's okay. We can do it together."

Adderheart melted away within the bigger tom's embrace.

chapter thirty two

Despite the warmth and comfort that Pantherleap's pelt brought, it didn't make the world go away.

When he opened his eyes again, the world was still around him. The world that held the coldness of leaf-bare and the chill of the snow all around, and the world that cradled its love for the snow like a newborn kit. The world that allowed the sun to slip in and out from behind the dark and angry clouds, only shining its light every few moments, so the snow could stick around.

The world in which Willowdapple loved him and thought he'd saved her kits or something dumb like that; the world in which he was harboring many secrets, a main one being the relationship with the tom next to him; the world in which SageClan had a leader that didn't seem to care about anyone, save for himself; the world in which everything he said was carefully chosen to ensure all was well.

For if he messed up, it was easy to banish him or make him suffer because of what he did. Depending on what it was, he could easily be exiled. Though, if he was careful, it was easy to pass it off. However, none of that even needed to happen, at least he hoped so. As long as he was precise with his words, then he'd be fine.

With a swift movement, he rose to his paws and cast his dark gray gaze to the warrior beside him. Pantherleap appeared startled, jumping momentarily as the pale tom inched away from him. Pantherleap also rose to his paws, tail flickering against the ground as he looked to his mate, his head lightly tipping to the side.

"Can we go back to camp now?" Adderheart asked softly. His voice seemed to be a carefully twirled spider web, one that was easily destroyed by simply a passing wind, and the chilly leaf-bare wind swooped by and stole his voice.

Pantherleap let his figure inch closer to Adderheart's before he

nodded. "Of course we can."

"Do you really think Finchpaw's ceremony will be today?" He asked. *Earlier he said it probably wasn't. But what if it is, and I'm just wasting my time?* He thought, ears twitching as he cast his dark gray gaze around at the snowy area.

"I don't think so, but I don't know," he answered, ears twitching. With that, Pantherleap headed forward, realizing a moment too late that the snow would be in the way. Adderheart shook his head and with a swift movement, he leaped cleanly over the large section of snow blocking the way.

His tail drooped perfectly so that it swept off the top layer of the snow, and he landed on the other side on an equally tall portion of snow. No matter how much sun it got, it always seemed to be there. At least, now it did. The snow grumbled and hissed at anyone trying to get rid of it, poking at their paws with a cold needle that would never go away.

After waiting for a few moments longer, Pantherleap came crashing through the wall of snow, his figure bashing against the cold substance. He shook his pelt out and snow went flying, and Adderheart narrowly dodged him and the particles of snow that flew up into the air.

Pantherleap gave him an apologetic look, though from there, the two headed off.

The journey back wasn't exactly a great one. It was improved by Pantherleap, of course, but besides that, it wasn't too pleasant. Every pawstep meant snow, and that meant being cold. And obviously, that wasn't great for anyone. By the time they'd gone halfway, both of them were shivering and had fluffed out their pelts, instinctively shifting closer to each other.

Then Pantherleap started to pick up some scents of nearby cats and he quickly pulled away, to Adderheart's dismay. But he knew it was for the best and so he made no comment, and he simply let it happen, as there was nothing he could do anyway.

Eventually, the two made it to camp, and Pantherleap insisted Adderheart go in first, so he did.

It was essentially the same as it had been. Lightly colored shadows danced in the corners of the camp, dashing around underneath where they could live, throwing elaborate parties for sundown's arrival, though the sun that laid delicately in the sky watched with a careful eye, as if to say that it was not yet time for sundown.

The clouds that had plagued it so prominently earlier had dissipated, appearing to quite literally disappear in thin air. They'd raced to the other side of the sky and then from there had easily flitted away, and then the sun was left to wreck its bright and warm damage upon the snowy world below it and the sky that was growing peachier by the moment.

But the snow was strong, and the sun was weak, so the snow stayed while the sun tried its best. It tried, it really did, it tried to get rid of the snow, for it knew how much the world hated it, and how annoying it could be. Though no matter how strong its rays were, leaf-bare dulled them and made them weaker by the moment. And as leaf-bare grew stronger, the sun grew weaker.

So the snowy "walls" within the camp had not grown much smaller, and if anything, they appeared to have been reinforced. By what? Adderheart didn't know, but he managed to walk in anyway and spotted that a small section of the snow had been cleared out. *The snow from there was likely added on top,* he realized, ears twitching as he padded over to the area without snow.

It felt wonderfully warm on his paws, and it was only because he hadn't felt something that wasn't snow in what felt like a million moons. He stood there for a few minutes, studying the area, and he realized that where he was standing would be the perfect place for a Clan meeting. Quickly, he backed up and then headed for the warrior's den, standing near the entrance.

He was fine being there, if he was being honest, as he could see that the area directly in front of each of the dens had been cleared of snow. He didn't know who had done this, but he thanked them anyways, silently of course. Maybe he'd ask around and thank them

for it. *But that wouldn't be normal. Cats don't thank others here.*

Shifting momentarily, he glanced to where he assumed Pantherleap would be, and he spotted the tom heading through the camp entrance and settling down in the middle of the camp. Adderheart rose to his paws and headed over to him, sitting down.

That was the very moment where he realized that a Clan meeting had been called and he'd completely missed the call. How had that happened? *I thought I was listening... I thought...?* His muzzle wrinkled momentarily but he looked upward, wrapping his tail over his paws as a few others cats' pelts brushed against his own.

He shifted, tail flickering back and forth as he shivered absently. He wished that they'd move away, though he couldn't exactly tell them to move, as he didn't know who it was. Briefly, he allowed his dark gray gaze to skimp around the area, and he spotted the majority of the Clan gathered.

"Today, I will conduct one of the most important ceremonies known to our kind."

Cougarstar's voice split across the clearing, causing the very ground to shake under the prospect that it was experiencing a Clan meeting. Everyone glanced up to him, seeming to know what he was speaking of. Adderheart sent a look to Pantherleap, though the tom wasn't looking at him.

The warrior was staring straight up at his brother, green eyes carefully trained upon the leader's. Adderheart quickly pretended that he was looking past the tom beside him and he glanced at the next closest cat; Finchpaw. She was also looking at the leader, though her gaze wandered momentarily, catching upon Adderheart's.

He dipped her head to her, not sure of what exactly he was doing, though he didn't seem to notice the fact that she sent one back to him. He looked back to the leader, who was surveying his Clan with a thorn-sharp gaze, almost as sharp as the claws he held on his hefty tawny paws. His mate was settled beside him, and Bearpatch was seated nearby, too.

"Bumblepaw, Swallowpaw, Birchpaw, and Finchpaw, please step forward."

All four apprentices stepped forward, their pawsteps lightly echoing as they did so. Birchpaw was first, followed by Bumblepaw, and Swallowpaw was quick to hurry up, standing beside the others. Finchpaw strolled up carefully, her figure composed with a warrior-like stature. She appeared almost elegant in the shiny light of the sun reflecting off the snow.

"Each of these apprentices has proved that they are capable to become warriors. Under the guidance of Fernfall, Fluffyflame, Freckletuft, and Bearpatch, they have learned a lot about our Clan and about how to protect themselves," he stated, his shoulders squared as he stared down at the apprentices.

"During their mid-assessment, they encountered rogues on our territory," he added, his lips drawing back in a snarl as he thought of the cats. Adderheart shifted, ears flickering harshly back and forth. *That's what it was? Rogues?*

The crowd of gathered cats seemed not to know of this fact either, as a ripple of surprise threaded its way through the cats. Runningfoot cast Beetlepath a sharp glance, and the green-eyed warrior sent a smile his way. Confusion flickered through Adderheart, and the crowd began to murmur.

"Hush!"

The voice split the clearing like a knife through thread, and everyone instantly seemed to stop talking. The wind continued to swirl around the clearing, biting into his pelt as he waited for the leader to continue. He appeared angry, hissing momentarily as he had thumped his tail against the ground beneath him to once more gain the attention of SageClanners.

"As we all know," he began once more, voice dripping with venom, "the rogues often harass us early. This is particularly true recently, as such an early leaf-bare leads to such early attack from the rogues. And for this reason, I find it only necessary to make warriors in such a time."

"Only after their mid-assessments?" A cat blurted, and all eyes seemed to turn to whoever it was; a light brown she-cat with darker spots, and a snow-white patch around her eye. *Briargaze.* Her dark blue eyes suddenly flashed but she tipped her head as she stared up to the leader.

"Yes," he responded, voice still furious. Notes of the same venom from before easily slipped in and out of his voice as he spoke. "Do you have a problem with that?"

She shook her head, though her jaw was pressed as if she wanted to say something more. But she didn't. Briargaze simply stayed silent, her posture as straight as ever as she lifted her head to stare at the leader, as if she were silently challenging him. Cougarstar's lips drew back and he let out a snarl, and many of the cats in the crowd flinched.

He whipped to stare at the crowd, eyes sharpening. "Growing weak, are we?" He prompted, giving another hiss of disapproval. "I demand fighting training for tomorrow. One simple snarl should not scare half of SageClan. Especially if we are to beat these rogues that do not leave us alone," he added, glaring momentarily before appearing to wish to continue with the ceremony.

"Each of these apprentices," he started once more, waving his tail almost lazily at the four cats below, "have proven themselves to me through being able to fend of these rogues. While the warriors present did help, it is clear that they know exactly how to defend from rogues, which is precisely what we need. Bumblepaw, step forward."

The black-and-white apprentice did as he was asked, his figure moving lightly as snow crunched beneath his paws. He allowed his head to tip upward a little, light brown gaze meeting the leader's sharp green one.

"I, as leader of SageClan, call upon the strength of my ancestors to allow this apprentice to become a warrior. Not through hard work but by intelligence they've been given and born with, Bumblepaw deserves a warrior name, and if StarClan not agree, then strike him down."

The common words of a warrior ceremony swirled through the air, and the clouds simply watched. The snow murmured quietly, and although Adderheart personally had never seen a "striking down", he knew it was possible. There'd been stories, many of which, that described cats who were fine until warriorhood, and before they knew it, the apprentice was lying dead in the middle of the clearing.

He knew not of who had told it to him. Many stories had been passed down over the moons, and he didn't know them by who told them to him anymore. He knew them by name, and one of the only stories he'd heard that included the "striking down" of an apprentice was dubbed "Drifting Sparks".

Consequently, the two apprentices were siblings and named Driftpaw and Sparkpaw. He wasn't sure who their mentors had been, though it wasn't relevant to the story. To an onlooker, the two were the perfect apprentices. They always helped out, they always cleaned nests, and they even picked ticks off the elders when they didn't have mouse bile.

Driftpaw, particularly, was quieter than his brother. Though, nobody seemed to mind all too much. Sparkpaw was talkative enough for both of them, getting to know a lot of the warriors from a young age. They did excellently on their mid-assessments, and they had apparently almost had their ceremonies right after.

However, the leader at the time, Pheasantstar, insisted they wait. His mate had wished and wished for the two apprentices to become warriors. Though, it didn't work, and all while the apprentices were waiting, they were trading information away. They were giving some of the Clan's secrets off to a group of which was fiercely hated by the entirety of SageClan. To who?

To the rogues.

Consequently, it had also been right at the beginning of leaf-bare and a horrible prey shortage had plagued the Clan for the past couple moons. In exchange for what was assumed to be prey, the two apprentices gave secrets and information to the rogues. Nobody was sure how this information came to be known, as it was assumed

that they had it closely guarded. Though it didn't really seem to matter.

As the ceremony finally occurred on the first day of their twelfth moon, Driftpaw was set to go first. And he did, until his figure was scorched by StarClan above. StarClan hadn't even given Pheasantstar enough time to finish what he was saying — he had only gotten as far as "and if StarClan" when their ancestors struck the apprentice down.

Instantly, panic had spread among the cats, but Pheasantstar assured them it was fine. Nobody believed him, of course, and he quickly attempted to do Sparkpaw's ceremony soon after to ensure all was well. However, the same happened, only the apprentice was struck down earlier than before — "and if" was as far as he'd ever get.

Though, the entire idea of it had been shoved rather hurriedly under the rug as soon as it had arrived. After they were scorched to pieces, Pheasantstar ordered their bodies cleaned immediately, and the Clan hurried away as the healers came to help clean up. Pheasantstar demanded that it not be spoken of, except in stories, portraying them as the bad cats in the grand scheme.

And of course, it didn't happen this time.

"Then by the powers I hold, I bestow my best warrior name upon him."

Cougarstar beckoned with his tail at Bumblepaw, and the tom approached, lifting his head up as he tipped it down. Harshly, the leader tapped his muzzle against the apprentice's head.

"From now on, you will be known as Bumblepuddle."

The leader drew back as the warrior did the same, and he continued.

"For your creativity and your balanced skills, you will now be known as a warrior of SageClan."

Despite the words Cougarstar spoke, Adderheart knew the skills and

the personality trait were just... lies. The leader didn't actually take time to get to know anyone within the Clan, and he just picked random traits he thought were fine. He was told by the mentors which skills the apprentices had, and he just easily skimped off that.

The Clan didn't cheer. It wasn't custom to do so, at least not yet. Bumblepuddle withdrew into the crowd, and the cats lightly shifted to ensure he had a place to stand. With that, Cougarstar looked to the remaining apprentices, and he almost seemed to sneer as his green gaze landed upon Finchpaw. With that, he began to talk once more.

"Finchpaw, step forward."

With a quick motion, the apprentice did as asked.

"I, as leader of SageClan, call upon the strength of my ancestors to allow this apprentice to become a warrior. Not through hard work but by intelligence they've been given and born with, Finchpaw deserves a warrior name, and if StarClan not agree, then strike her down."

Nothing.

"Then by the powers I hold, I bestow my best warrior name upon her."

Once more did he beckon with his tail, and the she-cat stepped forward, her head lifting up but dipping to show her respect. The tawny leader was only a little softer in that he nudged her head.

"From now on, you will be known as Finchtansy."

Again, he drew back, and the warrior did the same as he continued.

"For your intelligence and hunting skill, you will now be known as a warrior of SageClan."

The she-cat turned, tail flickering momentarily as she gazed around the crowd. A few cats nearby, appearing to be the ones who had moved in order to ensure that Bumblepuddle had a place to stand, shifted away once more. She padded back and seated herself down,

and Adderheart couldn't help but glance back.

Her gaze was simply stuck ahead, as if she was focused on something that was bound to happen. That she knew was to happen, and as much as she wanted to stop it, whatever it was... it simply wouldn't. Her gaze was dark, shadowed despite the happy event going on. *It's her warrior ceremony. Shouldn't she be happy?* Despite this, he swallowed his misgivings and looked back to the leader.

"Swallowpaw, step forward."

She did as asked.

"I, as leader of SageClan, call upon the strength of my ancestors to allow this apprentice to become a warrior. Not through hard work but by intelligence they've been given and born with, Swallowpaw deserves a warrior name, and if StarClan not agree, then strike her down."

Of course, nothing happened.

"Then by the powers I hold, I bestow my best warrior name upon her."

Once more did he beckon his tail to the warrior-to-be, and the she-cat stepped forward as was customary. She dipped her head though lifted it, and he did the same motion before beginning to speak.

"From now on, you will be known as Swallowripple."

As per the last times, both cats drew back.

"For your forethought and excelling skills, you will now be known as a warrior of SageClan."

Swallowripple turned back and instantly went to where the two previous apprentice-now-warriors had gone. She blended easily into the crowd, slipping in as if she was a snowflake among a snowdrift. Before she could even be seen she was gone, blended away and faded away in the memories of the Clan. Now all eyes turned to Birchpaw as the leader spoke.

"Birchpaw, step forward."

He did.

"I, as leader of SageClan, call upon the strength of my ancestors to allow this apprentice to become a warrior. Not through hard work but by intelligence they've been given and born with, Birchpaw deserves a warrior name, and if StarClan not agree, then strike him down."

And just like that, lightning split the icy and swirling leaf-bare air alongside a bright flash of light, and the apprentice lay still in the middle of the camp.

chapter thirty three

Immediately, the Clan seemed to collectively recoil, shock flitting through the crowd.

Lightning, as fast as it had been described in stories, flashed down from the sky, twisting and twirling as it zoomed through the air. It had been focused on one target, and as soon as it reached it, a bright flash of light lit the clearing like a forest fire that had been purposefully set.

Instantly, the apprentice seemed as though he was to convulse and scream, but before that could even happen, the lightning enveloped him, and as soon as it came it disappeared, leaving the tom's scorched corpse in the middle of camp. Leaving everyone to stare at it as if expecting that he would jump up and claim it a joke, leaving everyone to wonder what was happening.

The snow around the blazed apprentice had melted momentarily, allowing there to be a burnt spot in the camp; it was dark beneath his figure, almost as though the darkness from a night sky had swept down to pattern itself on the ground. Even the snow had some bits of black on it where it had been scorched by the lightning that'd jumped from the sky.

Particularly, the sky that waved happily above. No dark or stormy clouds were present; rather, it was the opposite, with the pale blue sky holding minimal puffy clouds and instead harboring wispy ones that darted easily across the sky. It seemed to watch the Clan with a serious gaze, though not one that was curious. One that was just watching.

Adderheart could sense the questions. They didn't need to be spoken aloud in order to be asked; it was in the eyes of the cats around him, in the features and the expressions of nearby cats. The inquiries popped up as cats shifted backward from the corpse, and they flooded the floor below. The ground was no longer the ground; now it was water, sloshing with questions.

And a cry ripped from a certain she-cat's throat, raw with horror and fear. Freckletuft — the apprentice's mentor — stumbled forward, but Cougarstar shook his figure harshly, narrowing his green gaze at the she-cat with his paw rising as if to warn her.

"Don't," he barked, "StarClan didn't agree, so he will not be a warrior of SageClan."

A tail whipped around Freckletuft's back paw, tightly gripping her paw, and it happened to be Fernfall's. Freckletuft stumbled, nearly tumbling to the ground as she was tugged back, but managed to gain her balance once more, and as if she had never even spoken or done anything, she simply slipped back into the crowd.

It seemed to be an ocean, sloshing and moving back and forth as to conceal the cats within it. Questions frothed at the surface, all bubbling and asking for an answer, begging for an explanation, but the sun simply shone down coldly. As certain parts of the sea moved forward, others splashed back to allow one part to move, and as soon as the first part moved back, it swallowed it all back up again, concealing the parts that had moved so harshly.

"Coalbelly, Twilightcloud, remove his body," Cougarstar ordered, a frown present on his features. It wasn't what appeared to be a normal one, though. It wasn't a sad one, nor was it one that showed he actually cared for the dead tom. It was almost disappointed, as if he wasn't pleased with the fact that Birchpaw was dead because he was just another number on his side regarding the rogues.

"Clearly, StarClan did not think that he was ready to be a warrior," Cougarstar spoke once more, voice sharp yet controlled. "Let this be a lesson. Do not get into any of the trouble that Birchpaw did."

Birchpaw got into trouble?

He had to have been lying, right? Birchpaw had barely even done that much, all considered. In the times that Adderheart had seen him, the apprentice hadn't done anything specifically wrong or bad. Cougarstar must've been lying to try to prove a point that was useless to prove. SageClan already cowered underneath him. Why did he need to keep pushing it?

Adderheart could feel the similar confusion pulsing through the crowd. Everyone seemed to be asking the same question, yet it floated within the air unanswered. Cougarstar was clearly not going to answer it, causing ripples within the ocean and waves within the crowd. A small murmur rose from the oceanic breezes, carried by a swirling salty wind.

Despite being unable to make out any words, he didn't need to. It was clear what was on everyone's mind; *what just happened, what did he do wrong, and what are we supposed to do now?*

Eventually, after most of the cats had split off into groups and began to chatter, Cougarstar slammed a paw down. The crowd jumped, startled, and his lips drew back in a snarl.

"Stop talking and get back to work."

His order crashed through the air and instantly, the group dispersed. Many warriors shuffled off to their den, and considering that the sky was growing peachier by the moment, it made sense. The newly named warriors did so, too, and Pantherleap even hurried after the crowd. Adderheart turned, gaze flickering around, and with that, he headed after the group.

"Poor Birchpaw," a voice murmured.

"His siblings will suffer the most," another cat whispered.

"I wonder what his name would've been?" That cat was Briargaze.

"Nobody except Cougarstar will ever know," came a reply, and that was clearly Mudstripe's voice.

"Finchtansy, Swallowripple, and Bumblepuddle will suffer the most from this," came an irritated hiss. Though, this voice was quieter, stranger, as if it had been twisted like a wire and the words tossed through a pair of claws. "They're only ten moons old."

Nobody replied to that voice.

As the huddle of warriors headed for their den, Finchtansy shuffled her way back to stand beside Adderheart. Surprised, he turned to

spot the she-cat and found she looked just like an apprentice. Perhaps that was because of her size, as she was smaller than most others, but she had the glow in her gaze as apprentices did.

Well, she didn't have the glow at that moment because of what she'd seen moments before. But it was still there, hidden beneath a layer of darkness and confusion, mixed carefully with horror and fear that spread from her in waves. She anxiously sidestepped to stand beside him and he looked to her, hating that notes of concern drifted across his features.

Don't do anything dumb. She's a friend.

What? I like toms.

No.

His lip almost curled as if in some sort of a pout, though he was quick to resolve it and tried to press the thoughts out of his mind. He glanced back to her once more, for his dark gray gaze had wandered away to his paws, sharp and hateful as he landed upon them. The now-warrior looked back and her muzzle twisted into a confused frown.

"What do we do?"

"There's not anything to do," came his reply. He believed it to be true; in this situation, what could they do? They'd be unable to speak with Coguarstar, and the healers couldn't give any sort of explanation. They didn't know any better than any of the warriors knew, did they?

He doubted they'd gotten any sort of clue from StarClan or anything else. Unless Cougarstar had previously told them about the 'trouble' that the apprentice had gotten into, though that didn't make any sense. Had they been around for it...? No, that couldn't be possible.

From what he had made connections between, it seemed as though the apprentice had done something when the rogues were around. But that didn't make sense either. He tried his best to recall, though he came up empty; had the apprentices gained injuries after their

mid-assessments? He didn't think so. But maybe his memory was failing him, for whatever reason.

Looking to the she-cat beside him, he briefly contemplated asking her about it. *If I did, would she even tell me the truth?* The thought drifted into his head and he shook it. Of course, she would. She had no reason to lie, but what if she was unwilling to go against what Cougarstar had already stated? *He* had no reason to believe she'd choose him wanting to know things over the leader's word.

Considering what he already knew about her, she was steadfast to the code and to the traditions already set up. It was unlikely she'd flip within moments to try to get him to gain more information. She was realistic, he knew that much, and so she probably was unlikely to do anything if he asked for any sort of help. But it wasn't worth just cutting her off. She was nice in general, and a warrior now too.

Not that it mattered, but most treated warriors better for reasons he didn't understand.

"Adderheart, what happened?"

Willowdapple.

Instantly, panic consumed him as if he were a dry riverbed and it was a flood. He felt stuck, completely trapped where he was. He had to talk to her. He *had* to. As much as he had tried to avoid her over the past couple days, she... she was *here.* How? Wasn't she supposed to be near the nursery with her kits? He didn't understand.

He turned and gave her a smile that seemed to immediately turn watery and uncertain upon his features, and he tried his best to have his eyes sparkle, have his features light up, but it wasn't working. *She's going to find out. She's going to find out and then she'll hate me and tell everyone. Then everyone else will hate me and then I'll have—*

"Birchpaw's dead. Did you not hear?"

The sharp tone of a nearby warrior cut through the air like a knife

through soft thread and Willowdapple instantly stopped talking. She cast Adderheart a confused and hurt look, as if the knife had sliced her pelt as well as the cloth, or perhaps her pelt was the cloth, easily destroyed and easily harmed. He wasn't sure. It didn't matter.

But who had been that cat, who stated something so sad so bluntly? Something so sad that the entire Clan had gone silent, or perhaps so shocking was better fitting for the situation. He knew not of what the apprentice had done, but he wasn't about to ask anyone, and especially not whoever that had been. Momentarily, and as if for support, he looked to Finchtansy.

The warrior, who had darted ahead upon the sharp words of the cat, was standing at the entrance to the warrior's den. Her paws and pelt were covered in snow, and her eyes were blurry, tears bubbling at the edges of her gaze. His ears twitched harshly upon seeing her, and Swallowripple paused beside the she-cat to murmur a few words to her.

He knew not of what she said, but it didn't matter. The new warrior turned soon after and slipped off, leaving Finchtansy to stand alone once more, the wind and snow swirling around her as if it was some sort of twisted dance, planned to cause her chilliness that was unsolvable. Her ginger ears twitched, and they were the only thing that helped her stand out from the white snow.

And then, within a moment, she was gone. The white-furred warrior had just ducked straight into the warrior's den, likely to find a nest before the older warriors moseyed in, irritated and miserable from the millionth death they'd seen. And he, now alone, for Pantherleap was not around, turned, and Willowdapple rushed up to him.

His pelt prickled immediately, but he returned her embrace awkwardly, trying to be as good as she thought he would be. She looked to him with a bright though slightly dulled gaze, ears perking.

"How're you? Feeling okay after what happened?" Her question was soft, leaping atop the chilly breezes in the air as if to trick the senior warrior that she was being sharp.

"Y-yeah."

She curled her tail around his own and he shifted momentarily, ears pricking and flickering back and forth harshly. It simply felt wrong. It didn't feel right to be with a she-cat, one of which believed they were mates when they just weren't. *You're a liar. Stop lying.* His tail twitched sharply upon this thought and he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

"I know, I know," she murmured softly, letting her figure drift closer to his. He kept his fur down, but it really wanted to puff up, as if he was protecting himself from the light and flighty she-cat. She pressed against him with suddenness and purred softly. "It's okay."

Tears blurred the edges of his dark gray eyes and he turned away quickly, lifting a paw to rub violently at his gaze. She couldn't see him cry. And his Clanmates were still around. *Don't cry. Don't cry.* He kept his figure still and let out a breath of air, trying to keep his ears perked, trying to keep his head somewhat lifted.

The she-cat beside him shifted before pulling back and as much as he hated it, a wave of relief swamped him. He glanced to her, and she mewed something softly, though it was lost to the winds. She twitched her ears and tipped her head.

"So...?" She prompted gently, voice as light as the chilly and icy wind around it. Just as soon as it had left her jaws, it was swept up and eaten by the breeze.

"Wh-what? Sorry, I didn't hear you," he managed, tipping his head as if to fake interest in something he didn't care about. As if he was lying. *Again. More lies.*

"Do you think the healers will let his mentor see him?"

I don't... that doesn't matter. Willowdapple, why did you do this? Sudden anger burst within him like a balloon popped by a small child. He didn't understand. Why did she come to him for all of these things when all he was trying to do was simply just get by? *She doesn't know about your lies, how could she adjust to fix what she's doing without knowing?*

He knew it within his mind; he wouldn't tell her, and so it was unfair of him to assume or hope that she'd fix things based upon lies she did not know of. But couldn't she at least try to pick up on some sort of context clue? The warrior still didn't get it. She'd completely hated him, but as soon as he'd helped her or something, she was in love with him.

Swallowing nervously, he gave a half-hearted shrug as a reply, though despite his calm exterior, or at least collected one, his mind still roared and continued to run from organized thought. He was unable to keep up with its running pace, for he was set only a moment slower, and no matter how fast he thought he was running, it was always ahead.

"Probably n-not," he added, ears twitching harshly as he gazed back to the she-cat.

She looked to him, pressing against him, and with that, she murmured, "Sorry, I can see you're shaken. I'll let you go."

With that, the she-cat turned away from him and headed off to the nursery.

Dazedly, he turned back, and quickly he shook out his pelt as if it was infected by her. Though, as soon as she disappeared, his figure seemed to relax a little more. Not completely, no, but definitely a little bit more than usual. His ears twitched as he gazed around, and consequently, his dark gray eyes caught on Pantherleap's green ones.

He simply looked for a few moments, and then the senior warrior turned and slipped away into the warrior's den. Now that night had finally swamped the Clan, everything was slowly turning dark. The sky was changing from its usual bright and peachy tones to a dark navy, followed by a suffocating black that covered the camp within moments.

Though, the moon still emerged, bringing with it sparkles to the snow. Adderheart turned to survey the Clan's camp for a moment, noticing that not much of it had melted. His muzzle twisted momentarily, as if in half of a frown, but he turned around and then

slipped into the warrior's den.

Immediately, warmth surrounded him, from the pelts and frames of all the cats around, but so did whispering voices.

"Willowdapple's right."

"What?"

"I wonder if Freckletuft will get to see his body."

"Adderheart's right; probably not."

He quietly shifted to where his nest was and curled up, trying to keep his pelt flat, trying to keep his heart steady, trying to quell his mind's everpresent worrying. Soon after, the voices fell silent.

Well, they fell more into the background of everything. Instead of loudly making their presences known, they slowly slipped into the darkness of the night; they slowly inched to swirl with the coldness of a leaf-bare moonhigh.

He listened to the noises around. The whistling of the wind seemed most prominent, though right underneath it was a chilly bite, and alongside it ran the breathing of the camp. It seemed to be in pace with something, though with what the tom did not know. But it didn't matter.

Eventually, after a while of shifting around and attempting to situate himself with a nest that always seemed to be poking into his side, the pale warrior fell asleep.

chapter thirty four

As soon as he woke, he realized that the entire Clan hadn't really registered what had occurred.

Everyone had just stumbled around, waiting for someone else to say something. No words had been spoken about the tom, only logistics, void of the emotion that deaths usually carried. Was that because of the possible lie that Cougarstar had let drift upon the Clan? He didn't know but it didn't seem to matter. What had occurred hadn't sunk in. Not yet.

That Birchpaw was gone, and that his siblings were warriors. That he would never gain a warrior name, and he would never feel the pride of an apprentice finally growing to be old enough to be considered a warrior. Briargaze knew of it, Mudstripe knew of it, Beetlepath knew of it; all of the newest warriors knew of it.

But Birchpaw would never get to know it, and the Clan would never get to see his figure alive and furred once more. Nobody would get to see him running around the camp, ears perked, calls echoing, trying to get his siblings and his friends to do something. No longer would anything happen regarding him. And what would Cougarstar do?

Turn to the rogues. Blame it on the rogues, claim it was all because of them when it was simply his fault. His and the entire complex he'd created for himself, yet one of which he refused to acknowledge because it would diminish the power he'd cradled in paws with claws unsheathed for moons and moons. It was all unfair, all bad and all unfair.

Tears blurring the edges of his dark gray gaze, Adderheart harshly rose from his spot in the den, eyes momentarily traveling around the den, only to land upon Swallowripple. Beside her, Bumblepuddle slept, though he thrashed and turned every few moments. Finchtansy was off toward the edge, and the senior warrior's muzzle twisted.

He forced his eyes away and quickly he turned, pushing himself to the edge of the den as he slipped through the entrance. It would simply be dumb to go hunting when Cougarstar had ordered fighting training for the day, but he really didn't want to do fighting. It was like he was trying to push the fighting-against-rogues thing even more than he previously had been.

Noticing that the snow was actually still around, and very much present and causing the camp to be surrounded by quite a chill that he shivered, the lean warrior shifted uncomfortably. Leaf-bare's snows were always bad, for reasons unknown, but it didn't matter. None of it did, really, for the snow had melted a little.

The walls were growing shorter and shorter, and he could actually see over them at this point of the day, which was surprising. The ground wasn't coated in the chilly substance any longer, and in its place the snow left small chunks of such. It was unable to leave completely it seemed, and the clouds above rumbled as if threatening to spill more snow upon the world.

And in that moment, several bloodied cats stumbled into camp.

"What happened?" He asked immediately, hurriedly loping over to catch a falling Poppyfur. The she-cat's muzzle was coated in blood, and the substance spilled easily from her maw. Horror engulfed him and he stumbled back, eyes widening.

Briargaze, standing nearby, had a cut across her cheek and had a chunk cut out from her ear. She stumbled momentarily, making her way to the medicine cat's den, not wanting to wait, and before she left, she quickly managed to snag Poppyfur. The she-cat appeared tired, and as she disappeared into the den, or at least in front of it, he caught the scent of prey upon their pelts.

"Rogues," a voice coughed out, and Adderheart turned to see Dustshade. His pelt, usually fluffy and mostly white, was now stained red. Crimson red. "At the border. We were hunting."

Adderheart's ears twitched harshly as his dark gray eyes swept the camp.

The spot upon the ground, burnt and already appearing to be fading, was fresh now within his vision as he looked, and he was quick to divert his eyes. Dustshade stumbled, lifting a paw as he huffed for breath, and Adderheart quickly turned to head for the healers' den.

But both dark-furred she-cats rushed from the den immediately, holding herbs in their jaws, and he noticed that they appeared withered. Not the she-cats, the herbs; the tips of their leaves were slowly inching away, as if frost was biting them away, and they were darkened and slightly curled down toward the ground.

Sidestepping as to not get in their way, he looked around once more, ears twitching as he watched the healers quickly apply herbs and usher the remaining cats to their den. Pawsteps suddenly filled the air and he could even hear Cougarstar's pawsteps echoing throughout the air, harsh and sudden as the tom marched around.

And as he turned, he found the tom *was* really there, and with a huff he marched straight up to Adderheart.

"What happened?" He demanded, eyes narrowed.

"Rogues," he explained, controlling his voice with an iron grip. "They attacked Dustshade and his hunting patrol at the border."

"*More* rogues? Get on sorting patrols," he ordered, whipping around to stalk toward the fresh-kill pile and survey that it had only a mouse. Scoffing, he grabbed it and sprung upon the highrock, whereupon he glared down at Adderheart. "So? Get on it!"

"I'm not... I don't do patrols, I'm Adderheart," he told the leader, hating that he wanted to shiver and run off; he had to explain first. He couldn't go hunting without getting this over with first, as much as he wanted to just up and go.

"What? Go find Palewhisker." Cougarstar looked down at him as if the order had been clearly explained for him, and his muzzle twisted into an irritated frown. "Hurry up!"

The senior warrior quickly rose and surveyed the camp, peering

over the snowy walls. He knew that the faster he'd be, the better, and so he was quick to hurry toward the den where the deputy was. Peeking in, he spotted the tom slumbering away.

"Palewhisker, Cougarstar wants you to sort patrols," he mewed, and immediately, the grayish-tawny tom sat up, eyes sharp as he gazed around before they, daggers, landed upon Adderheart.

"Why?" He demanded, rising to his paws as he shook out his pelt. "And why'd he get you?"

"There's rogues," he answered, and followed it up with a shrug.

The tom's expression dropped from anger to fury and he stormed out past him, and on the way out, their pelts touched, and Adderheart shivered, a cold claw running down his spine. *That's wrong.*

Turning, he heard Bearpatch shifting within the den, but the lean-bodied tom quickly headed out of the den, ears harshly twitching. He wasn't about to wait any longer than he already had to in order to see Bearpatch; he didn't want to see him.

Heading back out into the clearing, Cougarstar was still poised atop the highrock, and he was hovering over it like it was a kit. He watched the Clan as if he was an eagle, flying above the rest of the Clan as he watched, eyes narrowed at the cats milling around.

A lot, if not most, of the warriors had gotten up, noting the words that had been so quickly tossed across the clearing. Freckletuft was one of the first up, pelt ruffled and eyes glazed, but the she-cat still forced herself upward to get out of the den. Fernfall was quick to follow, as was Marigoldcry. All of the new warriors flooded out of the den at the same time, movements swift.

From there, most of the warriors inched out of the den, swallowing yawns or hurriedly grooming their pelts. Cougarstar whipped his tail in Palewhisker's direction, who was standing in the middle of the camp.

It was a strange feeling that flitted through the air. It was similar to

a chill, yet it was calming, rather stilling, in that it took hold of Adderheart and sent a wave of tranquility upon the usually nervous tom. Was this welcome? He didn't know, but it wasn't leaving.

"We're going to be focusing on fighting training," Palewhisker announced, tail lifting as he flickered it around. His chin lifted as he looked down upon the cats around camp. "And I want a patrol to search for the rogues that injured this dawn patrol."

The Clan appeared surprised though nobody said anything, rather simply just watched and waited for him to continue.

"Adderheart, Russetpelt, Antwhisper, and Beetlepath; you four go hunting. Margoldcry, Fernfall, Pantherleap, you three go look for the rogues, and the rest of you go battle train. Galewind, stay, and you too, Finchtansy."

Upon these words, the pale-furred warrior tried to fight down a wave of relief. He needed to be updated what was going on within the camp, and going hunting wouldn't really do much to help with that. But he also didn't want to go searching for these rogues.

It wasn't like he had a choice. Russetpelt charged forward, quickly heading for the entrance. Beetlepath sidestepped after the warrior, followed by Antwhisper, and the pale-furred senior warrior had nothing left to do but follow the three departing cats.

The world around was still covered in snow. As much as it had melted over time due to the sun's light above, it was still considerably snowy. The ground still had a thick layer of the cold substance upon the floor, pricking upward at the pawpads of the cats on patrol. Adderheart watched as Russetpelt picked his way over the mounds of snow that had built up at certain parts, particularly underneath some tall-rising pine trees.

He grew confused momentarily, as Beetlepath followed as he avoided the snow. However, Antwhisper narrowed his eyes, scoffed, and simply slipped by, charing right into the snow. What was the issue with stepping in it? The entire territory was covered in it, so why were the two warriors avoiding it? He decided not to press but found that the more they walked along, the more the two warriors

edged around snow, or random holes within the territory.

A burst of energy surrounded the lean-bodied tom and he quickly sprung forward, lifting his muzzle as he soared through the air momentarily. And just like that, he caught the fleeting scent of a mouse, or some sort of creature that usually was upon the ground. In leaf-bare months he knew that prey was always difficult to find, but with snow in such big amounts, it was incredibly difficult to find anything.

He figured that the other warriors had yet to scent this prey, and so he continued on and lashed his tail as if to indicate that they not follow. Antwhisper caught the meaning and he quickly swerved away so Adderheart pushed on, leaping over a mound of snow. Endlessly, his paws seemed to slam upon the ground, and snow easily was thrown up behind him in some form of white, fluffy flag.

Eventually, he came upon a clearing which seemed to hold a strange aura surrounding it. Eyes sweeping the snowy ground below, he spotted a mouse, nibbling on something underneath the first layer of snow nearby to a tree's roots. The pine tree above the little creature simply waved its branches in a hello to the warrior who had approached, and apparently, the mouse had noticed him, too.

He could almost sense the horror within it as it whipped to run off, but he took several leaping bounds to catch up. Huffing as he slammed his paws down, he lifted them and found no mouse. A curse pressed at his lips but he whipped around, quickly scenting the air, and charged after where he thought it had gone.

Supposing that it wasn't strong enough to climb a tree, and supposing that it wasn't strong enough to run far due to the cold and foodless conditions, he decided that running after where he'd thought it had gone would be good enough. The more and more he ran, he noticed flashes of what seemed like a mouse's tail ahead of him.

He reared to a stop as pain spiraled up his leg, but he gritted his teeth and continued, hurriedly rushing forward as he finally caught up to the creature. And within a moment, he slammed his paw

down upon its paw, sending it through the snow.

Losing his balance, he jerked forward and fell, easily making an imprint in the snow. Quickly, he rose and turned harshly, peering down to where the creature was supposed to be.

And there it was, twisted awkwardly at being placed in such a situation. Its legs were twisted upward, but it didn't appear to be suffering all that much.

Biting down easily upon it, the mouse soon went still, and he lifted himself and it up with a quick jump into the air. Scenting the air, he caught the scent of blood and glanced down to reassure himself; there it was, splattered upon the pristine white snow. Shifting momentarily, he padded a bit away, the scent of pines wreathing around him.

He gazed around as if expecting to find the patrol running up to him, but he was alone within the pines.

Turning away, he slipped around the trees, moving his way through the pine trees as though he was a breeze. His figure was smooth in its movement, pelt hardly brushing up as he continued to weave his way throughout the territory. He had yet to scent the patrol but hoped that he was at least getting a little bit closer, as he didn't want to be wandering forever.

Eventually, after much weaving and careful wandering throughout the large number of pine trees, he caught Antwhisper's scent, caught on one of the trees, and so he took off after it.

Finally, he spotted the half-familiar reddish-brown pelt of the warrior, and instead of making a big deal about it, he simply slipped into the line of the patrol. Within moments, nobody seemed to have noticed his arrival, though he didn't say anything, and he didn't do anything.

Antwhisper eventually turned and appeared surprised to see Adderheart.

"Good catch," he commented, dipping his head to the senior

warrior. Beetlepath beside him turned and nodded absently at Adderheart. Russetpelt simply flickered his tail to the tom as if to say the same thing Antwhisper had.

"Thanks," he responded, disliking how the words seemed to drop through the air like a rock through water. The patrol's dynamic was... strange, and he didn't exactly like it. Most of them seemed to be on the quieter and more goal-oriented side, meaning that none of them wished to discuss idly. But could he expect them to do so? No. It wasn't like he did.

Taking a quick glance ahead to survey the amount of prey they'd gotten, he found only one small and half-dead vole. He decided it was best if he didn't question as to why it looked as though it had been completely shredded, but he did let a few simple words escape his maw; it was only polite, after all.

"Nice catch."

"Thanks."

The reply was as simple as ever, and as much as he disliked it, at least it was something.

Silence settled upon the group as though it were a blanket of snow and they were the ground, silent and unmoving under its cold form. They walked along, quiet, pawsteps muffled by the actual snow beneath their lightly shifting paws. The walk wasn't difficult, rather it was the opposite, in that it was easy to head along.

There was no path but there didn't need to be. And as much as the silence around them was unsettling, it was familiar in its strangeness and totality. He was used to a silence that was somewhat comforting, though this wasn't similar to it in any way. But did that mean he disliked it? That was harder to tell.

Slipping around a tree, his dark gray gaze momentarily shifted to survey each member of the patrol, and all appeared content with keeping the patrol quiet and continually walking along. But his legs were growing tired, as his eyes were growing less and less focused on the things in front of him and more so willing to flit around, and

his mind was growing louder as time went on, too.

"Are we going to go back to camp?" He finally asked, feeling as though he'd just taken the last piece of prey from a starving Clan.

The group stayed silent for a few moments and terror easily sparked within the senior warrior. *What if they didn't hear me? Do I have to repeat myself? What if rogues are around and they're causing too much noise, or what if they're distracted too?* Thoughts running, running and jumping away from him and straight out of his grasp, slipping and sliding upon the now-melting snow, caused by the shame from his pelt, heating everything up and causing all the prey to wither.

Wither and die.

"Let's," Antwhisper added soon after, and the rest of the patrol nodded.

chapter thirty five

The travel back to camp was not what Adderheart had originally expected it to be.

He hadn't realized their closeness to the border of the territory, so when Antwhisper stopped to lift his muzzle into the air and scent it, everyone appeared confused. Adderheart approached him with a tip of his head forming, tail flickering.

"What?" He prompted, looking around as if to spot some form of creature emerging from the bushes.

"Can you smell that?" Antwhisper asked, continuing to smell the air. Soon enough, he turned around and walked slowly in the direction of whatever he was scenting, and Russetpelt watched with confusion scrawled on his features. Beetlepath followed, leaping into the bushes, yet Adderheart looked to Russetpelt.

"I don't smell anything," the other warrior said, ears twitching as he cast his gaze after the disappearance of both warriors.

"We've got to follow them anyways," Adderheart decided, slipping into the bushes after the two warriors, and he could hear the rustling of the bush behind him as Russetpelt followed.

After tracking the two cat's scents down, he finally realized what they had been smelling. It wasn't more prey, it wasn't another cat; it was blood. It made sense, didn't it, for being at the border? Despite the regularity of the smell, a familiar panic spurred within the tom, and he allowed his ears to twitch, trying to ensure they didn't flatten.

Catching up with both warriors, Adderheart mewed, "I can. I can smell it." His voice only lightly wobbled back and forth, a note or two of anxiety slipping in, yet he just tried his best to cover it up with a cough soon after.

"Blood," Beetlepath said, and with that, the warrior pointed with a brown tail down at several splotches of blood on the snow beneath.

He wanted to vomit, but he couldn't. As much as the smell made him uncomfortable, as much as he disliked it, as much as it clogged his senses and made everything difficult, including breathing, he couldn't. As much as it felt like his ears were being plugged with it, his muzzle was forever tainted with it, his eyes themselves were now bleeding, forever infected by the awful—

"It smells like... like Milkfrost and Vixenfeather."

Adderheart wanted to vomit more and more as the moments went by. The elders were dead. There was absolutely no way they had survived this long alone, and there was no way they were with the rogues. If the rogues were around here — which he assumed they were — then they would've kicked the elders out long ago.

But how were they here? They couldn't have survived, and it wasn't like they had help from anyone within the Clan or anyone outside of the Clan. They were everything he hated, but he didn't hate them. He hated that he was like them, and a familiar spark of hot anger, the one that made tears flash in the edges of his vision, rose as quickly as a wave upon a shore.

Shifting uncomfortably, he leaned down and sniffed the blood, recognizing the smell. They were right. But how, how was it possible? He didn't understand how it could be when the two elders were dead. Nobody had seen their bodies but they didn't need to see their bodies when it was so obvious. Panic clambered through him, grasping him tightly.

He inched backward, muzzle lifting as if to try and get him away from the smell of the blood, and away from the scent of the elders. He still didn't understand how it could be possible. It wasn't that they were dead; it was that they were gone. Their scents and blood... how could it be possible?

"How?" Beetlepath questioned, leaning down to sniff the blood once more, as if to confirm that it really was the elders'. "They're not around here. Cougarstar will throw a fit if he hears of this, and we

don't even know if they're around."

Beetlepath clearly understood the going-ons of the Clan, and of Cougarstar, better than Adderheart had originally assumed; the pale tom looked over to the brown warrior who had just spoken and shifted nervously, ears harshly twitching.

"There's nothing we can do." Russetpelt glanced to each cat before explaining, with a little bit of hesitance, "we can't find them, and he won't believe us either. He'll claim it to be prey's blood."

A sudden spark of hope lit within the tom. That was what it was; prey's blood. It couldn't be the elders, they weren't around, but it could be prey because they all had it. And if prey had gotten injured just wandering the territory, of course it could be that it was prey. Obviously... how had they been so dumb in figuring out what it had been?

Yet as his mind took off upon that trail, he knew it to be impossible. There was no way that it could be prey's blood because there would've been more, there would've been remains, there would've been a trail. It wouldn't have just stopped randomly in the middle of the snow, and there would be a corpse somewhere around if prey had actually died.

And if it had just been one piece of prey, then it should've smelled like prey too. But it didn't. It smelled exactly like how he remembered the elders' scents to be. He couldn't pinpoint smells within smells but that didn't matter. It was clear what the scents were, yet what they meant was harder to decipher.

"It has to be the elders," Antwisper huffed, cutting into Adderheart's thoughts, "but we can't do anything about it."

"I'm not telling," Adderheart said, not knowing if it was the right place, not knowing if that was what he was meant to say.

But it seemed to go well over with the other members of the patrol, as Beetlepath nodded soon after, and Russetpelt simply just flicked an ear, supposedly in agreement.

"And nobody else will, either," Antwhisper told the group in a firm though easy tone, as if he expected such to already happen, solidifying Adderheart's earlier assumptions.

With a slight pause, Antwhisper lifted a paw and he carefully swiped a little bit of snow over the bloody patch, carefully covering it with the new, fresh, bloodless snow. No, rather, it wasn't fresh. But it was untainted by the crimson liquid, and that meant that it was calm and clean. He tore his gaze up and away from it and picked up his mouse.

"Camp," he instructed, words easily flowing from his maw, and the rest of the cats silently turned to head back.

The travel back was the exact same as it had been before the blood had been discovered. It was quiet, though he wasn't sure if the other members of the patrol liked that or not. It was a stranger silence than before, though; a knowingness wreathed around the group, tightly wrapping itself around their necks.

Before, it had been almost comforting, though not in the sense that it was nice, that it was kind. It was around in the sense that it liked to be around there and it liked to watch the group pad around within the territory. It liked to watch as it grew and grew as time went on, leaving no room for words to grow or blossom from anyone's maws.

He supposed this silence was nicer. But it was restrictive, in that it required complete silence to exist. No prey scuttling. No bush shifting. And so everyone was silent. Adderheart could almost sense the uncomfortableness that rose from the group, and his own pelt prickled hotly as he walked, swallowing nervously as he glanced around.

And as they arrived in camp, Beetlepath slipped in first, harshly shoving past the other members of the patrol. He had been in the back, but apparently needed to be inside first, and so Antwhisper reared back out of confusion as he was shoved by. Adderheart's dark gray eyes met Antwhisper's and the latter tom shook his head before entering the camp.

Russetpelt filed in next, and Adderheart could do nothing else but follow the rest of the cats into camp.

Adderheart gazed around, quickly attempting to take inventory of who was around. Quickly, he realized that it had been completely cleared of any snow, and now he could finally see the bottom of the camp.

The sun rose high above, waving its strength around as though it was bragging that it was finally stronger. Despite it being leaf-bare, the sun had finally risen and hung within the sky, eyes scathingly scraping the area, preparing to melt the mounds of snow that had clambered upward within days where the sun had slacked. But now it was back.

Well, not quite. It wasn't that strong. Despite its warmth, it wasn't *that* warm, and it was still leaf-bare. The sun glared over to the clouds that flitted around beside it as if cursing them for allowing its light to be so darkened at times, and the clouds simply hovered away. Nobody wished to speak to it, for its only purpose was to light and melt the snow. And of course, signify that their patrol had taken almost all morning.

Shifting nervously, he glanced to Russetpelt, who had done similarly to him; survey the camp to see if anyone was around, and there was. And, Russetpelt, upon seeing those in camp, quickly hurried off to the warrior's den, an easy escape as he headed for the den. Just like that, the tom's reddish fur disappeared to the darkness and gloominess of the den.

Those around camp weren't doing anything. They were looking at the sky, then around the camp, then to the empty prey pile, and then back to the sky. It was as though they were stuck within a cycle that was never-ending and inescapable. Well, Finchtansy wasn't.

The she-cat was still nudging small mounds of snow away from the camp's center and toward the walls, and just then did he notice the large amount of snow that had gathered at the edges. *Did she take her time and push all of the snow there?* He seemed not to understand yet he noticed her raw pawpads and guessed that she'd done it

alone.

Momentary sadness made the tom glance away. Had she really done it all alone? Someone else had stayed back with her, right? As much as he tried, he couldn't recall who it was, and if the cat had been standing around, a figure had just disappeared into the warrior's den, and so he supposed he wouldn't know.

Antwhisper padded to the fresh-kill pile, and Adderheart followed. Soon after dropping his piece on the pile, Willowdapple, from the nursery, quickly hurried over. He didn't need to see her features or hear her words, not just yet; he could tell it was her from the excited pawsteps and the almost bumbling pace.

Immediately, his stomach sank, and he turned and waved his tail to the she-cat. She smiled at him, and the she-cat was quick to grab his catch from the pile. Pressing to him soon after, a few words escaped her maw.

"Isn't he such a great hunter?" It was smooth and sweet like honey, *real* honey, not honey that held tones of sharpness or venom. It was soft and sweet, rolling and pleasant, and it flowed easily from her maw as though she was the bee that had procured it.

Antwhisper cast him a sharp look, and Adderheart's ears harshly twitched, sudden panic leaping within him. He pressed awkwardly against the she-cat in response, his belly churning. Everything within him was saying to get away, and it was saying even more so to snap at the tom who was watching. Fighting to keep his figure straight, the tom mewed a response.

"Thanks— I'm sure you're the same," he told her, looking to her, and he forced notes of pleasantness into his tone. Antwhisper had stepped away, but the tom still kept his eyes trained upon Adderheart.

His mate purred softly, and he forced one, too. The she-cat wrung around him momentarily for a moment, and he pressed against her, hating how their pelts brushed, hating how it felt so wrong, hating how she thought it was real, hating it all, and she slipped away within a moment, the piece of prey hanging from her jaws as she

headed for the nursery.

Pelt prickling so harshly he thought it probably looked as though he was in the middle of a snowstorm, the tom glanced around, as if to see if anyone would know of his lies. As if to see if anyone could detect what he was doing. As if to see if his facade wasn't believable enough. Yet he saw nobody, for Antwhisper had dissipated, though Finchtansy was sitting nearby.

Finchtansy.

The overwhelming and sudden panic spiraled inside of him once more.

Does she know?

Carefully, he watched her, eyes trained upon her pale pelt. The she-cat waved her tail in response, and she rose and padded to him. She appeared to be calm, all considered.

"Hi," she mewed, voice quiet and soft, as though it was the very wind itself.

He dipped his head in response, sensing a conversation, so the tom sat down, wrapping his tail over his paws as his gaze momentarily darted to the sky. It was as though he could seek shelter in places that were constantly around; the snow, the sky, the clouds, as though one day he could leap up and hide within them when it meant the most.

Finchtansy settled down beside him, and he noticed that she was careful to keep her distance, shuffling so that she was beside him, but not touching him, and not close enough to do so. Relief quickly swamped him, followed by a familiar string of panic. If she was doing that, did she know? Quickly, he pushed it down, and he paused to look at the ground.

"How're you?" He asked. The question was so basic and so boring he almost thought she'd get up and leave.

"Fine," she answered, ears twitching. "I'm... a little unhappy. With Birchpaw, that whole thing, you know—" She cut herself off, head

shaking as she looked back around, ears twitching. He cast his gaze to her, head tipping, concern flickering within him.

"I know," he murmured. "It's okay. It's normal."

"The rest of the Clan seems to be already moving on," she answered, a note of nervousness lifting into her tone before it was quickly smothered. "And I'm here not knowing whether or not to mourn further because I should be, or move on because everyone else is."

The openness of her words surprised him; in front of the Clan, these words would never be spoken. But to him, they *were* spoken, and with no remorse, from what he could tell. He glanced at her.

She was realistic, he knew that. She'd likely move on quickly because that was what everyone else was doing because that was the idea of the rest of the Clan; move on swiftly. Yet, they wished not to forget cats and still move on so speedily from their deaths? He couldn't imagine Birchpaw up in StarClan watching the conversation.

"However you want to deal with it," he stated, "is your way of dealing with it."

"How do you deal with it?"

That query silenced him. He knew not the answer to her question. How *did* he deal with it?

"It doesn't matter how I deal with it," he mewed, eyes drifting to meet the she-cat's. "It's your death to deal with. I didn't know Birchpaw; you did, and you know how to deal with it."

She shifted to look at him. "But I don't, I don't. The Clan's trying to move on and I thought it wasn't as quick as this, it's barely been... I'm not sure. But I know I can figure it out, somehow." *Optimistic as always,* he reflected.

"Death's different for everyone," he explained, "just like how everyone's dealing with the rogues differently."

She looked to him as though he'd said something wrong and his

head tipped sharply.

"That's... that's not similar at all," she sighed, shaking her head.

Ears harshly twitched, he quickly said, "Sorry— I'm sorry." *What did I say?* Concern bubbled inside of him, and his dark gray eyes quickly darted to meet hers. She shifted and she rose to her paws, head shaking momentarily.

"It's alright. I should probably be getting to sleep anyways, my paws..." she trailed off as she lifted them, and shock flitted through him; they were rubbed raw, red in tone compared to the usual pinkish shades they held. His ears flicked and he frowned, shaking his head.

"Did you clear the camp?"

She nodded as she rose to her paws, motioning with one of them at the lack of snow. His muzzle twisted as the frown worsened upon his maw, yet he allowed it to dissipate as he dipped his head.

The she-cat returned it, and he could almost see the uncomfortableness fade away from the air as she turned to enter the warrior's den. As soon as she approached it she slipped in, the air felt cold and sharp once more, as though cats who he spoke to hold the warmth of greenleaf, and everything else cradled leaf-bare's chilly touch.

Glancing around the camp momentarily, the tom rose to his paws, taking a deep breath. Familiar worries began to bubble up within him as they usually did when he was alone, and he shuffled his paws as he once more directed his gaze to survey the camp. It helped him, at least he thought it did. To calm down and to focus on something else that wasn't within his mind.

Taking a few pawsteps into the camp, he realized that Finchtansy had done a lot more work than he'd originally assumed. All of the snow, including the walls and including the carpet of snow beneath said walls, had been completely removed and shoved to the edges. He'd seen it before, but it was just different when she'd shown him her raw paw pads.

Turning, he headed for the warrior's den, and with that, he entered, ears flickering.

Murmurs rose all around yet he ignored them all, simply heading for where he knew his nest was. His scent was prominent within it, and so he picked his way through the cats around and settled down. He wrapped his tail tightly around his figure, noticing that it was still light outside. The sun was no longer so high that one could see it easily but that didn't matter.

He laid his head down on his paws and allowed himself to drift away. All thoughts seemed to immediately disappear as he rested, yet they popped up every now and then.

Poison they were, and the antidote was sleep, yet he couldn't get rid of the poison till he slept. And sleeping could only happen if there was no poison. So he struggled to calm himself down, for the whispers and pawsteps outside reignited the worries from earlier. The multitude of cats allowed his mind to start racing down well-worn paths of anxiety once more.

He didn't know what they were saying but it didn't really matter; it was all still worrying, all still concerning. His ears flicked harshly back and forth, and once he opened his eyes, he instantly noticed that the sun had completely left the sky, and it was night. A harsh wave of realization crashed upon the pale-furred warrior.

I've been spending all day trying to fall asleep.

And that was the very last thought he had before he fell into slumber.

chapter thirty six

He woke up at his usual time.

It was somewhat pleasant out, with the world mildly warmed by the sun that was just starting to creep over the horizon. The moon and the stars alike turned tail and dashed off from all that was light, and with them, they dragged along the darkness that harbored itself within the night sky. Clouds, too, apparently, for at seeing the sun, they disappeared.

There was not a single trace of snow within the camp, though at the edges small puddles of water had gathered. They looked warm enough, at least to the pale warrior who had stepped carefully out of the warrior's den and exited. His dark gray eyes swept camp momentarily, noting the lack of snow, and glanced to the fresh-kill pile.

It was empty once more, and his stomach rumbled uncomfortably loud. *When did I eat last?* He thought, ears twitching. It felt like it'd been moons and moons since he'd last eaten at least just a scrap of prey, yet he knew that to be untrue. It'd probably been yesterday, maybe late the previous day. However, it didn't seem to matter, because the moment he attempted to move only a few pawsteps from the den, he nearly tripped.

Instantly dizzy, Adderheart glanced around and black dots danced at the edges of his apparently dissipating vision. Huffing as though to take a breath, the tom forced himself to settle down at the edge of the warrior's den, unwilling to move much more in case the exact same thing happened. Over time, his head began to hurt, earning a sort of pounding quality about it.

With a soft breath of air escaping his maw, he saw his breath cloud within the chilly leaf-bare breeze. Shifting, he moved closer to the den as though trying to snag some form of warmth from it, but the warmth couldn't protect him from the pawsteps that suddenly echoed within the camp, and the voice that soon followed it, too.

"Adderheart?"

Willowdapple.

It didn't even need to happen yet; his headache immediately got worse and he looked up to her, offering a smile that simply seemed fake in its very being. He grimaced soon after, lifting a paw and pressing it to his cranium, all before he realized she was carrying something within her jaws, and she dropped it in front of him soon after.

"I took this from the pile last night, and I wanted to save it so we could share together."

It was a large, decently so, anyways, piece of prey. Wingspan large and feathers prominent, the cardinal's soulless black eyes stared into his dark gray ones. Shifting, he rose to his paws and cleared his throat before answering, hoping that his voice was still a little powerful in nature.

"Can we go to the nursery?"

"Why?" She asked, tipping her head.

I can't say anything other than kits, can I?

"The kits—"

"Of course," she murmured, casting him a loving look as she pressed to him momentarily. Suppressing a shiver, he followed her to the nursery, slipping within the den and settling down in one of the nests. However, upon seeing her litter, he allowed himself to inch closer.

Memories of her two deceased kits popped up within his head, and he shifted uncomfortably, attempting to remind himself that these two kits were alive. They'd gotten bigger in previous days, he realized, with slimmed bellies as well as heightened features. He nosed them gently and one squeaked.

If he could do one thing to try and convince her that he loved her, it was do things with the kits.

She was not the kits, and he wasn't the father of the kits, either. Everybody already knew that he wasn't the father; it was clear by his actions within previous moons, and really, that was all he cared about. So, the tom simply settled closer to her litter, and she did the same on the opposite side, nudging him the bird.

Taking a bite of it, he swallowed the prey, suddenly ravenous. Yet, he nudged it back, and the she-cat began to talk.

"I think it's sweet you want to help with all the patrols and stuff," she started, "but you have to be careful."

"Why?" He asked, glancing to her as he took another bite of the prey at his paws. *I want to go on patrols. I want to be out of camp. To get away from you.*

The thought caused a great deal of guilt to surround him and his ears harshly twitched, yet the she-cat next to him didn't seem to notice. She wrapped her tail around her kits and inched them closer to her figure, letting a soft purr rise from her throat.

"Because the kits need you, and me, too," she mewed softly, ears twitching as she looked down to them. "I think it's important you're around to raise them."

"They're your kits," he blurted, "I think it's fine if I'm around I guess. But you're their main parent, and if someone you like more comes along, I don't want them to think I'm their father."

His words didn't really make sense and he was painfully aware of that. Yet, she just pressed against him, shaking her head.

"There won't be anyone better. Not than you," she whispered, purring as she pressed closely to him.

She doesn't know. She thinks I really do love her. I'm horrible. This is horrible.

He couldn't help but feel worse and worse as she pressed closer to his figure. He shook his head, shifting his figure as he glanced around the nursery, as though it would have his answer. *How do I get out of this situation? I'm horrible, this shouldn't be happening. She*

deserves so much more than me, than me lying to her and being with Pantherleap.

And the more I tell her that she deserves more than me, the more she thinks I'm just a tom who needs a nice, kind, considerate mate to tell him otherwise. Guilt and shame consumed him as though he were a shore and the emotions were a wave, quickly submerging him underwater, and he could almost feel tears pricking at the edges of his vision.

Stop. Stop. He didn't want to cry; it would be bad of him, he wasn't meant to. She was just being nice and cats didn't cry randomly, yet no matter what he wanted to do, tears continued to press at the edges of his gaze, and she noticed. Delicately, she lifted a paw and swiped them away.

"Are you okay?" Her voice was soft, smooth, something of the sun itself as it drifted from her maw.

"Y-yes," he hiccuped, and easily his ears pinned tightly to his skull. Shifting, the pale tom lifted his own paw to rub violently at his teary eyes. Yet as she continued to talk, the tears simply just spilled past his gaze and slipped down his features.

"I'm sorry, don't cry. Did I say something wrong?" She curled around him as she looked down to the kits, "the kits want to be safe with you, I want to be safe with you. You're better than you think you are."

I'm really not. I'm really not. I'm going against every code ever made and I'm lying to you. And you think I love you!

He wished she would notice his awful ways so he could just back out and claim he'd fallen out of love with her. Even if Cougarstar forced them together originally and even if he wanted them to stay, the tom knew that if Willowdapple ever found out, she'd do something horrible. Horrible enough to make Birchpaw's death seem mild.

And so it was a closely guarded secret, and the more he stacked up the worse he felt. The rogues were only getting worse, the situation

with Pantherleap was only getting more complicated, Willowdapple was just pushing and pushing and being more and more kind, and Cougarstar continued to reign as though the entire Clan were some sort of puppet he could toy with.

One of the kits, Featherkit it appeared, had shuffled away from his mother's side and inched toward the nursery's entrance. His sleek brown pelt had grown out over the days and now it appeared he had white patches forming upon his fur. Though, this didn't seem to stop him in any of his adventures.

Ears twitching, the little kit poked at the entrance, and without seeming to want to wait, he hopped up and easily slipped out.

Ever watchful, Adderheart sprung immediately to his paws and launched himself over, paws instantly slamming against the ground as he checked around the entrance. The kit was quick moving, apparently. He was somewhere around camp, just not near the nursery.

"Adderheart?" Willowdapple asked, "what's going on?"

He shook his head, even knowing she couldn't see him, and he launched out into the clearing.

Eyes sweeping around, he swiftly located the kit simply bouncing nearby to the fresh-kill pile. Trotting over, he swept the kit up who squeaked in response, and upon realizing what he was doing, he dropped the kit.

Squealing and yelping loudly now, Featherkit hobbled over to the fresh-kill pile once more.

Fox-dung. "Over here l-little one," he stuttered, approaching the kit and lightly shuffling him to the nursery. "Come along."

Willowdapple's figure appeared as she rushed over and began to murmur sharply to her kit, sweeping the tom up and racing back. Adderheart could only follow in silence, hurrying so that nobody would see them, so that nobody would see him.

Soon enough did all three cats re-arrive within the nursery's safe

walls, and as soon as Adderheart was inside, he seemed to instantly melt away into the nearest nest. Worry and fear were clear to see within his eyes yet he wished so badly to hide it from the queen and the cat who was meant to be his mate.

She simply headed over to her nest, wrapping her tail tighter over both of them. She pulled both of her kits closer to her belly and whispered something softly to both of them before leaning back and patting them gently on their skulls with her front paw. Her gaze started up to spot Adderheart's.

What's she going to say? Will she berate me for not grabbing the kits right away? Did she see me? Terror quickly grasped the tom, and really only for one reason; he didn't want anything that had happened in the past regarding her litter to happen again. He didn't want her to see her kits dead, and then instantly believe them otherwise, and he'd have to watch it all, so he was overall displeased with the situation.

I would've avoided it if I could've! It was as though he was attempting to convince the worry within his head that all was to be fine in the end and that all was to be resolved, and most of all that she wouldn't do the "my kits are alive" thing again. Yet, no matter how much he pushed for his head to stop, it continued and it believed him wrong and it correct, which caused him all the more to worry.

"I'm glad you tried to save him," she mewed after a moment's pause, yet to the tom it felt more like a year. "I knew you really did care for them."

Surprise followed by hurt instantly flitted through him and at the latter, a strong wave of disgust filled him. *Why I am feeling hurt by something that doesn't matter? Her approval or disapproval doesn't matter. But it's not the disapproval or whatever. It's that she thinks I care for them— no, it's that she thinks that before I didn't care for them.*

His head made no sense but that didn't keep him from saying something in response: "I did care for them. I always have."

"I know," she immediately assured him, "I know. And that's why I love you; you're caring and you're going to be a great father to our

kits."

Your kits! Your kits! He wanted to scream the words so loudly that the entire camp knew, that the entire world knew. These kits were not his in any world, and they never would be as long as Willowdapple was around. As long as she was around, the kits would never be his own. They would never be his own.

Within him, he knew that he should've been taking care of them. She was her mate, and these were her kits, and so in turn, they were his to take care of. Yet, he felt no connection to them; except that their names matched with elders who had showed him something so prominently, they technically weren't his kits at all. And that was something he latched onto so tightly that he would never let go.

He didn't want anything tying him down to Willowdapple or her family at all, so when he wished to go and get away from the entire situation he'd fabricated, he'd made up, he could leave her be.

From her figure did one of the kits waddle away, and she quickly swept her tail to try and retract him back in. Yet, the kit was persistent, and it appeared to be Stagkit. Broad-shouldered and tabby-marked, the ginger-brown tom waddled unsteadily forward, little paws reaching forward. He let out a squeak and rolled onto the ground.

Stagkit seemed to motion with his little mitten to his brother, tail soon flickering harshly against the ground as he chirped something almost inaudibly. Willowdapple cast Adderheart a glance littered with happiness, and he had to avert his gaze. Rising to her paws, she lightly swept her tail closer to the small kit, yet he squealed loudly in response to her fluffy tail growing closer to him.

Abruptly, the queen stopped and allowed him to wander for a few moments, for the kit teetered in one direction rather swiftly upon realizing his mother was going to leave him be. He inched closer and closer to where Adderheart didn't want him to go, closer and closer to where he wasn't supposed to go, and when the kit finally tumbled at his paws, he rose up and shook his head.

"What? What's wrong?" She asked immediately, concern lighting her gaze.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong," he told her, ears harshly twitching. "I need to go out hunting." It was a lie, another one spilled to try and protect himself from something. From being in the den with her longer than he needed to be.

"Are you sure? I can get some more time if you need, I want—"

"No, I need to contribute," he cut her off, "especially after eating something." His dark gray eyes wandered to the piece of prey nearby, partially finished, and he swept over, taking a large bite before nodding his head rather harshly.

"Really?" She questioned softly, using her paw to tap it upon the ground, and Stagkit chirped in response. "You spend a lot of time hunting... you're meant to be the kits' father, you should be around, too."

"This Clan doesn't agree with that," he snapped, and instantly he shook his head, stumbling backward. "Sorry, I didn't m-mean to snap at you, I— you know how this Clan is, it's not... conventional. I can't do that, I have to provide for the Clan."

Her eyebrows knitted momentarily before she gave a sad sigh. "I understand. I'm sorry."

It's not your fault! I'm the one who snapped! Stop apologizing!

"It's okay," he breathed, using the back of his paw to rub away the tears now rushing to his eyes. *Where's Pantherleap? I need Pantherleap.*

"I love you," she mewed as he turned to leave, and he simply pushed himself faster out of the den.

Instantly, it felt as though the weight from being around her was lifted, yet another one slammed down upon his figure without a second thought. Nearly stumbling from the invisible weight, he quickly brought up a paw to wipe at his blurring gaze. Quickly, he padded to the camp's entrance, eyes sweeping around as though to

ask where the cat he was looking for was.

Yet as he gazed around, the tom was nowhere to be seen.

He didn't seem to be around, yet that didn't mean that Adderheart was about to give up. His heart was pounding faster and faster by the moment, causing his head to spin. Huffing momentarily, he quickly stepped out of camp, instantly taking several deep breaths. *Don't cry, don't cry.* Gaze blurring, the tom turned and immediately wanted to run to the figure approaching.

"Adderheart?" Pantherleap asked, concern flitting into the undertones of his voice. "Are you going hunting? I noticed the pile —"

"Come on, come on," he spluttered, tugging on the tom's paw. "We have to go, I have to go—"

"Hey!" His tone instantly sharpened and he shoved Adderheart away from camp. "Everyone can still see us," he started, yet his voice seemed to morph back to normal, "so? Do you want to hunt?"

"Yeah, we should, let's— let's do that," he answered, giving a watery smile and Pantherleap simply sighed a little.

"Come on," he murmured softly.

And from there, the two headed off into the territory.

chapter thirty seven

"What happened?"

It appeared that Pantherleap was unwilling to wait too long before they got away from camp, because as soon as they were a decent bit away from the cats around, he asked a question, soft and quiet.

"She wants me to be around her kits, to be their father, and I don't want that," he started, "I don't want... I don't want them."

"You have to do it," Pantherleap mewed softly in response, and Adderheart shook his head sharply as he continued around a rock. His eyes wandered absently as they continued through the territory.

"No, no, I know she'll find out. I need a solution, *we* need a solution, she'll find out or someone else will and then it'll be all over," the pale tom added, head shaking soon after. "Then Featherkit got away and I had to go out and get him, but then I couldn't pick him up and then Willowdapple—"

"You can't keep doing this, Adderheart," Pantherleap interrupted gently, pausing next to a tree.

He turned to him, confusion and something similar to panic rising within him. "Doing what? What am I doing?"

"You accidentally get into situations and then end up having to leave with me following," he murmured, "the more we leave together, the more we come back together, the more suspicious it is."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to— I just don't know what to d-do, and I don't want to be with Willowdapple an-anymore," he replied, quickly stumbling over his words, and he hurriedly shifted his position, trying to calm himself. Yet, the panic that quickly rose within him was inconsolable and harsh, grasping tightly onto him.

"I know you didn't mean to," Pantherleap answered.

"Am I coming to you t-too much? Do I need to try and deal with things on m-my own?" He asked though he knew the answer. Every time *something goes wrong, I'm always turning back to him, always asking where he is, always needing him. I need to stop, he doesn't have all the time in the world, and if something happens—*

"No, it's okay," Pantherleap responded instantly. "It's okay if you want to come to me. But instead of getting in these situations in the first place, just avoid them."

Ears harshly twitching, Adderheart shrugged in response, feeling familiar hot tears blurring at the edges of his vision. He lifted a paw as though to wipe it away, however, it quickly fell as power seemed to drain from his figure.

However, it seemed as though Pantherleap had picked up on what was happening, and the tom lifted a paw carefully. Quickly, Adderheart's gaze stuck to it, yet when he reached it forward as though to brush away his tears, he jerked backward, fur rising quickly.

"Wait, s-sorry, I didn't—" he stuttered, and he hated the way that he was able to see hurt flash within Pantherleap's eyes. "Sorry, I didn't, I didn't m-mean to—"

The larger tom rose to his paws and Adderheart's maw opened, yet he simply just approached him and pulled him closer with his paw. Inching closer, he went silent, yet that didn't mean that his head had stopped all of the thoughts. Inconsolable and never-ending it was, grasping tighter and tighter as moments passed.

And little did he know that his breathing momentarily picked up, that his eyes continued to blur with tears of which he wished he could just wipe away within a swipe, and that his figure began to shake as though he was being harmed. Next to him, Pantherleap clearly noticed this, ears flickering up harshly upon noting said facts.

He tipped his head and gently lifted his paw, using it to wipe

Adderheart's gaze, using it to brush away the tears, and he laid his head on the other tom's shoulder. Pantherleap lifted a paw and wrapped it around Adderheart's figure, pulling him closer once more, and the two sat like that while the world continued on.

There was no need to make a big deal out of it. Simply, they were just enjoying each other's company; maybe with a little more contact, and maybe with less talking, yet that didn't make it better worse.

The sun above peeked out from a few clouds and gently settled down around them, creating a small halo of safety for the two toms as they laid. There was nothing else to say between the two, yet Adderheart had a feeling that Pantherleap had wanted to continue.

"Did you want to continue?" He asked softly, feeling as though a tone too loud would break the delicate silence of the air.

"Cougarstar really wants to find the camp with the rogues in it," he replied quietly, and as much as Adderheart didn't want to talk about the rogues, he supposed it was necessary. "He told us he was sending out search patrols."

"What patrols are they?"

"I don't know. He made it sound like they were secret patrols or something like that, so others wouldn't know and get worried over it."

"Cats aren't worried over where they are, they're worried about getting attacked in the middle of the territory," muttered Adderheart, a spike of anxiety suddenly swarming him, and he looked up, straightening his figure.

"Hey, hey, there's nobody here but us." Pantherleap nudged him.

"I know," he murmured. "I just... had to check anyways."

Pantherleap simply looked away, inching closer to his mate as he tentatively wrapped his tail around Adderheart's, and the two returned to their former positions as the former began to talk once more.

"He didn't seem at all worried about Birchpaw. He ignored every possible consequence for it and decided not to publicly speak of it."

"His Clan's not dealing so well," Adderheart murmured, "well, at least I know Finchtansy isn't. She spoke to me and it was clear she was upset."

"Finchtansy?" He questioned with a slight tip of his head, and then a frown settled upon his features. "She's a good warrior. If I could tell someone else about this, it'd be her."

"Really?" He asked, ears twitching. *Would I tell her if it would be safe to do so?*

"Yeah, probably," Pantherleap commented, "she sounds very open and willing to listen, so if it was posed the right way, she'd probably be fine."

"But no risks."

"No risks."

That was what the two seemed content with saying, as both went quiet.

As silence settled upon the two like a blanket upon a child, the world continued to move around them. The cold leaf-bare breezes skipped by, snapping and biting at where their fur wasn't fluffed up. It was a sharp, icy wind, yet the sun protested lightly as it tried to bring warmth to the world. Yet, its pale light was simply unable to do that.

Nobody minded. Well, the prey did, but most cats had long, fluffy pelts that they could easily fluff up and use to protect themselves. Those with shorter pelts suffered during leaf-bare, yet they got it easy during greenleaf, so really, there was no use in complaining. Adderheart's own creamy-brown pelt was of a usual length, so he had the greatest of all.

"Come on," Pantherleap mewed gently, nudging Adderheart as he rose to his paws.

"What? What? What's going on?"

"Nothing, we're just going back."

"With no prey?"

"I guess."

A frown crossed Adderheart's features, and he scented the air. What he smelled was not a mouse, nor a vole, nor anything to be caught, yet he turned to his mate with alarm.

"Do you smell that?"

The tom across from him did the same thing and then turned sharply, tail lifting as he went silent. Ears pinning to his skull, Adderheart watched as Pantherleap snuck around for a few moments, allowing his figure to slip easily through the trees. Quickly following, Adderheart's tail flickered through the air.

Pantherleap eventually drew himself up and *said* something.

"What are you doing here?"

A high-pitched voice replied, "I'm exploring for what I assume is your camp."

Adderheart stepped out to stand beside his mate, allowing his figure to appear taller than it really was. The she-cat ahead of them was sleek-furred, with a black-toned pelt and lighter markings, and her shiny blue eyes grazed both of them. She didn't seem afraid and she didn't seem confused.

"Why are you looking for our camp? And who are you?"

"Because Tawn told me to," she replied. "Do you know who that is?"

"No," Adderheart cut in. "Who's that? And who are you?" Pantherleap lightly allowed his tail to drift against Adderheart's as though he were praising him.

"Tawn's my leader," the black-furred she-cat responded, eyes

narrowing. "I'm Sola. Who are *you*?"

Pantherleap sprung forward, unsheathing his claws as he sprung for the she-cat's throat, and instantly she seemed to lose the air from her lungs.

"Wh-what was that f-f-for?!" She exclaimed, huffing as she looked up to the tom.

"You know what it was for," he snapped. "You were going to attack us!"

"I wasn't. I wasn't! I'm just looking for this camp! Do you know where it is?"

"What camp?" Adderheart interrupted, stalking up to peer over her as Pantherleap continued to pin her harshly. The pressure point was no longer her neck, though, and it had shifted to her shoulders.

"A bunch of cats live there," she mewed pointedly. "Are you rogues or with them?"

SageClan. She's talking about SageClan.

Understanding flooded him.

We just got information from a rogue.

Ears harshly twitching, Adderheart sharply turned and gazed around the area around. Had that just been a rustling of the bushes? His head swung sharply and the she-cat beneath Pantherleap huffed.

"Let go of me! And you never even answered!"

"I'm not letting go of you until you tell us why you were stalking around."

"I wasn't!"

"You *were*. You wanted o— the camp so you took to exploring the territory around."

"Only Clanners call it a 'territory'."

"Then you must not know anyone within this *territory*."

Before the two could continue, a yowl split the air and Adderheart quickly sprung to the now-approaching cat.

He'd seen them in the bushes. He didn't know how he'd managed to spot the cat that looked to be almost an exact copy of Sola. The shiny-furred black cat had the same blue eyes yet only had white markings upon his face, and he was furious, clearly, for Adderheart had seen his angry sapphire eyes through the bushes. And so, he jumped out, jaws stretched and aiming for Pantherleap.

But such was useless, as Adderheart intercepted him and bowled him over. Claws scored over his head yet he gritted his teeth and kicked harshly with his back legs at the tom's belly. He roared, paws flailing, and with that, he appeared to try and push the senior warrior back.

Though a tawny-furred shape darted by and pinned the tom easily, and Pantherleap snapped his jaws at the tom. Apparently, it caught, because he screeched once more, though his tone cut off and molded into strange coughing. Adderheart swiftly turned and swiped a paw underneath Sola's leg, and she tripped easily. Rushing to pin her, he pressed a paw firmly down, now trying to regain his breath.

"And who are *you*?" Pantherleap asked, venom dripping from his tone.

"Salem. I'm-m Sola's littermate," he answered, spluttering as blood spilled from his maw. "C-can you just get off? Tawn's going to be s-so angry if she finds I've been injured—"

"Adder," Pantherleap interrupted his little speech as he looked to the warrior. "Kill them?"

Yet, panic leapt within him. *My name's not Adder. It's Adderheart*. Though after thinking more and more, he realized it was to disguise their warrior status. But he couldn't call Pantherleap Panther, could

he? Maybe they'd recognize him, maybe Cougarstar had said something and a rogue had been listening in.

And should we kill them? They hadn't done anything wrong except happen to show up at the wrong time, yet that didn't mean that they were safe. They had information that could be bad. Had Sola seen the two of them huddled together? *Maybe she'd tell Salem before she died. But that wouldn't do anything.*

Pantherleap looked to him and his eyes were carefully concealed, and quickly Adderheart applied the same notion to his own dark gray gaze. He didn't know if they were to be killed or not. Cougarstar would want them dead, he knew that, but what if he wanted them alive? For information?

Then maybe he wants them alive. It was all too confusing yet a decision had to be made because Salem's spluttering turned to blood spattering all over Pantherleap's paws and belly. Sola whispered something yet what she had said, Adderheart didn't know.

Salem hissed something in response, momentarily convulsing, and Adderheart nearly stumbled back, bile rising in his throat. They had to die, didn't they? One was ruined and gone beyond herbs repair and the other was likely already tired from seeing her brother injured this way.

"What do you think?" Turning the question back on the tom wasn't his best option, yet he did it anyways. There was nothing better he could think of, so that had to be the option. Pantherleap cast him a look yet soon enough the tawny tom looked down to the struggling cats.

"How old are you both?" Pantherleap asked.

"I'm eighteen moons," Sola spat, and to say the least, Adderheart was surprised. She was young and had a fire of determination not present in many of the warriors in SageClan; at least, not that was outwardly shown.

"T-ten," the tom managed to hiss out.

"You're from different litters?" Adderheart blurted without thinking, confusion quickly clambering within him. Cats from different litters didn't often care that much about each other, but who was he to assume?

"Yeah, why? Is that a problem?" Sola snapped, glancing to him. "Our parents are gone, probably killed by Clanners like *you*."

Adderheart's gaze darted swiftly up to Pantherleap's and found the tom meeting his eyes. He knew, they both knew. And so did the two rogues; they knew of their SageClan status.

"Why should you have to kill us?" Sola pressed, "can't you let us live?"

"Well, you clearly know," Pantherleap interrupted, allowing his grip to loosen upon the tom beneath him. "I can't have you going back to your camp and claiming you saw two warriors, now can I?"

"Our camp? How do you know about that? It's not even easy to find —"

"S-Sola!" Salem interrupted, struggling still. He cast her a sharp glare and she suddenly seemed to stop talking, yet Adderheart could sense the words bubbling at her maw. "There's n-no camp. No camp," Salem insisted, huffing momentarily as he shifted underneath Pantherleap.

"There clearly is," Pantherleap criticized, shaking his skull. "But now you know."

So what can we do? Adderheart didn't know what they were going to do with these two rogues now that they knew about the fact the two of them were from SageClan. Even more so, they knew that they were currently in their territory, and that just gave them more information.

They couldn't just take them back to camp, could they?

Prisoners.

Adderheart's head jerked straight up as he thought of it, and quickly

he gazed around the area. All seemed silent and quiet for the time being, yet he knew his next move was to ruin that.

Quickly leaning down, he grasped the she-cat's scruff tightly within his jaws and clamped down as hard as he could. She screeched out of confusion, and he turned to see Pantherleap shoving the tom to his paws as he did the same. Adderheart almost wanted to shiver. *This feels wrong.* But if they didn't do it, the same thing would happen to them.

"You're coming back to camp with us," Adderheart announced, "and we'll see what Cougarstar wants to do with you."

"Back to camp?" Sola spat, "I knew it!"

Salem groaned, huffing as he shifted backward. Pantherleap snapped down tighter on his scruff and Adderheart had nothing more to do than hide his flinch.

"Don't talk."

Pantherleap's words cut the clearing as though it was some sort of demand and not an instruction. This side of any cat was always startling but Adderheart reassured himself that it was only because of the situation. *He would never do this to me. He loves me. I love him.* A familiar trail of ice ran down his back yet he ignored it.

Sola opened her maw to say something else, but that ended badly, as Pantherleap shot her a cutting and evidently angry glare. The black-furred she-cat simply silenced herself, yet Adderheart could feel that she was shaking because she was so angry. He grimaced though quickly wiped it off his features, casting his gaze slowly back to Pantherleap.

He seemed to ask if it was time to go back to camp, and the tawny tom allowed his features to dip in a nod.

And with that, the two warriors began to drag both rogues back to camp.

chapter thirty eight

The very second they arrived in camp, Adderheart almost thought that the entire camp had been notified of what happened.

It was as though there had been some sort of message that had been sent out before they'd arrived. Instantly, Cougarstar sprung out and glared at the two as he whipped his tail. That alone seemed to notify the rest of the camp, and warriors flooded from the den, curiosity shining within their gazes. Palewhisker and Bearpatch stalked from the den, yet the latter more so slipped out in a much smoother way.

"What's going on here?" Cougarstar demanded, slapping his tail against the ground. Sola groaned as she finally seemed to slip away from Adderheart's grasp, and she simply thunked against the ground as though she were a rock.

"Who's that?" Palewhisker questioned, flicking his tail sharply at Salem and Sola. "Marigoldcry, Freckletuft, get them to camp's center." The two warriors quickly rushed from the gathering crowd and dragged them both to the camp's middle, whereupon both black cats hissed.

Adderheart peered closer as Pantherleap yanked him back into the crowd and he could easily see blood seeping from where the two warriors were grasping their scruffs. Holding back a flinch, the pale-furred tom allowed his gaze to meet Cougarstar's.

"Who are they, I said?" Palewhisker badgered, turning a hostile gaze on both toms.

"Salem," Pantherleap answered, pointing his tail at the tom. "Sola."

"Siblings, different litters though, and rogues. We found them searching for our camp, due to orders issued by Tawn, their leader, from their camp," Adderheart added. Anxiety swirled deep within his figure yet he tried his best to breathe normally. *If I explain this,*

then I'll be in his good graces. At least for right now.

"Ages?" pressed Cougarstar, who had stalked over to both of the rogues. Marigoldcry had Sola pinned by her throat, yet Freckletuft had her paw slammed fiercely down on Salem's tail as to ensure he didn't squirm. When he inched to the left, a loud ripping sound threaded its way through the camp, and he roared in an agonizingly loud tone.

"Shut up," snapped Palewhisker as the tom's hisses devolved into pained whimpers, "and don't rip his tail, maybe it has a trail to their camp."

"Sorry," mumbled Freckletuft, looking down at the now-still tom. "He was the one who moved."

"Sola is eighteen. Salem is ten," Pantherleap answered, allowing his voice to grow loud as though to catch the attention of the crowd. It apparently worked, for the majority of the spectator's gazes flitted to survey Pantherleap. He seated himself and Adderheart did the same, his tail wrapping over his paws.

"Warrior and apprentice," mused Cougarstar, venomously glaring down at both rogues. Sola glared up, fierce determination glittering within her gaze. He simply chuckled and allowed a paw with claws unsheathed to dangle above her features. She bared her teeth and he trailed a claw across her cheek.

Instantly she convulsed, which happened to allow Marigoldcry's claws to sink right into her throat. She whined in agony, her paws flailing as she tried to get free.

"Don't move," Palewhisker spat, stalking over to her as he sliced a claw across her flank. The black rogue flinched, tears bubbling at the edges of her usually shiny, though now dulled with agony, blue gaze.

"Don't h-hurt me!" She gasped, managing to shove Marigoldcry off her throat as she choked for a moment, coughing up blood as it bubbled at her maw.

"Stop talking," ordered Palewhisker, and the she-cat seemed to stop, though she managed to lift a paw to harshly swipe at the blood now pooling around her neck and muzzle. She huffed as though to try and breathe and the deputy glared harshly down at her.

"How'd you find them?" Cougarstar glared at Palewhisker as though to order to him to ensure the she-cat didn't make any more noises. The deputy leveled his gaze before averting it, swallowing an evident lump in his throat.

Pantherleap responded, "Sola was stalking us and trying to gain information as to where our camp was. Salem was alongside her yet he hid and attempted to attack us, though Adderheart saw him in time and pinned him."

Bearpatch, who had appeared beside his father, sent a dip of his skull to the warrior. Adderheart couldn't help the confusion and worry that quickly spiraled up within him. *I thought he was supposed to be neutral. Unless he's not? Or maybe Cougarstar is making him do this all.*

Though Cougarstar, similarly, sent him an approving nod and, really, he wasn't appreciative of it at all. It meant that a leader agreed with what he'd done; a leader that was horrible in every way possible had approved of his actions. A leader that disagreed with something he was doing so strongly he was willing to cast cats from his Clan approved of what he'd done.

Shifting, he allowed his ears to twitch as though in a half-reply. He was unwilling to speak to them, at least, he was unwilling to do so directly, and especially when they'd been so evident in their actions. He could almost sense the sharp gazes of other cats trained upon his pelt, scorching and harsh in nature.

"So, tell us about Tawn." Palewhisker's tone was sweet like honey yet it was an order. "Who wants to go first?"

"Sola? Salem?" Cougarstar prompted, slipping over to peer down at the former cat. She had gone still, attempting to breathe, and she'd even managed to lift a paw and apply pressure to her neck. The blood around her was evidently harsh-smelling and horrible to look

at. Within the sun's light, it momentarily glinted and shimmered.

"You want to go first?" Palewhisker commented, harshly poking Salem in the side, and he mutedly shook his skull. With that, he turned back to Cougarstar, who was still hanging over the dark-furred she-cat. "Okay, it's decided then; Sola, go ahead!" He purred, poison flitting in and out of his sweet tone.

The she-cat huffed, rising unsteadily to her paws. Cougarstar glared at her yet she ignored it, huffing and panting as she attempted to gain balance and breath. She managed to spit out, "If I d-die, then I won't be able to tell you an-any information— so give me s-some herbs, or I won't— I c-can't—"

She quickly stumbled over her words before toppling back to the ground, seeming to begin gasping for air once more. Without any orders, Coalbelly dashed over, dropping a few leaves in front of her before tossing the same ones over to her brother. Yet, before much else could occur, the two cats quickly ate them, trying their best to appear weak.

It was clear to see that they *were* weak, but they could've easily been weaker. They easily could've been dying on the ground, and while they could've easily been assumed close to such, they had the little strength left to allow them to move minimally.

"What are you doing?!" Palewhisker demanded, hissing as he stepped up to Coalbelly, who now was swiftly wrapping cobwebs around Sola's figure. "Don't *help* them!"

"Sola's right. If we want information, they can't be dead," the healer replied in an even tone, soon enough moving on to Salem to do the same. "I'm not giving them too many herbs, only wrapping their injuries."

"What? You can't be serious. Helping a rogue? *Two* rogues?" The deputy scoffed as he allowed his paw to slap against the healer's skull. She swallowed something that seemed like a snap as he glared at her, and Bearpatch's voice split the clearing.

"Don't hit her."

Palewhisker stepped back, fury still clear within his eyes as he seated himself near to the rogues. The Clan watched silently as a small trickle of blood slowly formed from where the deputy had hit Coalbelly's skull. She worked silently, not making a single sound as the two rogues occasionally hissed or groaned in pain. Eventually, the dark-furred healer finished and rose quietly, heading off to her den.

Cougarstar said and did nothing to his son, and Tinydust carefully huddled beside the much larger brown-furred tom. The heir didn't seem angry, and if he was, he was hiding it well. He was simply watching, gaze sharp and now narrowed as he surveyed the Clan.

"You have to tell us about Tawn," Palewhisker retorted, narrowing his pale brown eyes at the two rogues. "Sola, you were to go first. Go ahead."

The black-furred she-cat had cobwebs wrapped around several portions of her frame, including most prominently around her neck. The bleeding was slowly pausing as time went on, at least that was what Adderheart thought. He wasn't sure what the herbs she'd eaten were, but they were likely for strength.

Sola pulled herself into an awkward sitting position with an irritated hiss, lifting a paw as she licked it and drew it over her ear. Craning her neck momentarily, she turned to glare at Palewhisker before beginning to speak.

"What will you do if I don't?"

"Hurt you," Cougarstar interrupted, stalking over to her as he towered above the smaller she-cat. His green eyes were like poison, and they dripped furiously into his tone and into every action he did.

"How?" She questioned in reply, struggling to keep her voice steady.

"Whatever you can think of." The leader's reply was followed up with a large and bloodstained smile, his white teeth already harboring crimson blood upon their sharp surfaces. She narrowed her eyes, swiping her paw against the ground.

"Fine," she replied, clearly cross. "Tawn is my leader and she leads the rogue group I live with. She's tawny-furred with darker paws and dark golden eyes and her build is like yours."

Cougarstar's eyes flashed with something that almost looked like panic, but he quickly concealed it and harshly flicked his tail at Tinydust. The she-cat's features turned to a confused frown yet she quickly turned and hurried off, attempting to drag her son off with her.

The tom, confused, attempted to get away from Tinydust, yet she tugged harshly upon his paw. With a confused expression scrawled all over his appearance, Bearpatch turned and followed the she-cat. She darted for the leader's den and quickly headed in, and voices immediately exploded from the den.

With a huff, the leader paused and turned, waving his tail furiously in front of the den, and the talking grew quiet once more.

"Go on," ordered Cougarstar.

"She wants us to attack you," she continued, her tail wrapping around her paws as she glanced around the camp. Adderheart kept his dark gray eyes trained upon the ground underneath her. He was unwilling to look at her.

Cougarstar laughed before he stopped himself, and he asked sharply, "When?"

"I don't know, she didn't tell me. But we have been looking for your camp, and we also have been looking for one of our ranks that disappeared while injured," she commented, glancing to the leader. Panic leaped up within Adderheart. *That can't be—*

"Well that's nice, but we're not here for that," the leader interrupted, tail waving dismissively. Adderheart could almost feel his head shaking. His throat felt dry and he huffed as though to gain control over the breath that was swiftly spiraling away from him. *No, no, don't! Don't—*

"His name's Carmin, and he had dark blue eyes," she continued, and

he wanted to run right there. He hated it all. *Why did I have to be there? Why?* Feelings long buried rose harshly and with a newly conjured vengeance, and all he could do was sway slightly as he swallowed nervously.

"Oh, him, he's dead," Palewhisker cut in with a shrug. "Our first encounter with rogues left the poor injured tom dead," he continued before his tone turned much more mocking, "a shame. He was going to join us."

He wasn't! He wasn't going to do that! He wasn't ever going to join!

Fury followed more by panic and worry sprung up within the warrior. Palewhisker was just lying all the time and he refused to tell any scrap of the truth. *These cats are stuck in our camp and he just keeps on lying! They'll probably stay and die here because Palewhisker refuses to feed them and orders nobody to interact with them.*

Yet nobody said or did anything. All except Sola of course, and her maw dropped open out of surprise before she quickly covered it, eyes rounding as Salem looked to her.

Tinydust exited the leader's den and quickly skittered to stand beside her mate, her tail waving behind her. She was silent and the Clan turned to look at her, and immediately she seemed to shrink backward, yet Cougarstar's paw inched her forward. Though she said nothing and simply watched, eyes trained upon Salem with her paws shifting momentarily.

"Oh," Sola mewed after a moment of silence had blanketed the camp. She carefully rose to her paws and huffed, noting her position in the camp before she seemed to topple over, skidding closer to the camp's entrance.

"What're you doing?" Cougarstar demanded, stepping over as Salem seemed to do the same.

"I slipped!" She protested furiously, anger quickly leaping up within her blue eyes. He huffed and stepped to be nearer to her, peering down at her with a sharp gaze.

"Whatever," he retorted, "tell me about your little rogue group."

"What about it?" Salem interrupted, and Palewhisker turned to glare at him.

He criticized, "Whatever *you* want to tell us. The cats in it, the size, where you are, direct instructions... you know, the stuff that's actually important to us." The deputy smiled and lifted a paw with his claws clearly unsheathed and both rogues shivered for a moment, inching backward and closer to each other.

"It has a pretty big number of cats," Salem began, "and we're all trained. There aren't many cats younger than Sola and I in it. There aren't any nursing queens and there aren't too many siblings."

"Trained? How so?"

"With unofficial cats who train each other," Salem answered, "my unofficial trainer is Lyra, but Boulder's is someone else."

"Who's Boulder? And Lyra?" Palewhisker interrupted.

"Boulder's one of the three cats younger than me. Emesan is youngest, and Faevyli trains her," he replied shortly after. "And Lyra is ivory-gray toned. She's nice, and many consider her a good trainer."

Mentors.

"How many cats? And where is it? And tell us about some of the cats, what they look like, how they act, more than what you gave us for her" Cougarstar chimed in shortly after.

"Wasari is the second youngest, and Maya trains him. The two aren't a good pair but he's ten moons just like me, so he has a little while to go," the dark-furred tom continued, and at noticing the sharp glare from Palewhisker, he inched closer to his sister, who found it reasonable to speak up.

"It's not a big group," she said, but it was ultimately too clear she was lying.

"Liar," claimed Palewhisker, stalking up to her as he waved his claws within her face. He caught them upon her cheek and smiled, shrugging shortly after. "Sorry," he mewed, though he turned once more to hide the rising grin.

She lifted her paw and wiped her cheek, and Salem cast her a concerned gaze. Yet, this seemed to anger Cougarstar, who sprung forward and clasped the tom by his throat. Immediately he fell to the ground, gasping upon air he could no longer breathe, and Palewhisker slammed a paw on the ground to draw the Clan's attention away.

"How big is it, Sola?" Palewhisker asked, slipping forward as he lifted a paw to drag it underneath her chin. "How many cats?"

"Not many," she replied again, figure still.

He slashed a claw down her neck and she shifted to allow it to slice right through the cobwebs, and the tom's maw dropped open as he kicked her belly. Falling backward, her hindlegs soared into the air and kicked him in the face; instantly, he snapped his jaws around it and bit. She roared loudly, thrashing before he asked again.

"How many cats?"

"Not... many," she spat once more through gritted teeth, but her tone quickly rose to an agonized yelp as he sunk his claws into her hindleg.

"*How many?*"

"Thirty, thirty," she spat, hissing, trying to contain herself as she trashed. "Thirty cats! Since you killed Carmin there's *thirty cats*! Now let go of me and my brother, we need to go, it's time, we need —"

Palewhisker laughed loudly, throwing the she-cat away as he let his grip finally go. She scrambled up to her paws, breathing heavily as she looked to her brother, who had gone limp within Cougarstar's harsh clutch. He was still breathing, at least it was assumed so, because he twitched every now and then as the moments passed.

Then the leader dropped the tom on the ground, and the two black cats immediately launched themselves toward the camp's exit. Cougarstar whipped around and various members of the crowd lurched forward but just like that, the two sprinted out.

As the group rose and some immediately sprung after the two rogues, many simply stayed, and Cougarstar watched, maw dropping. He slammed both front paws against the ground in a largely frustrated manner, his green eyes turning to daggers.

"You *failures*, go and *get them*!" Cougarstar's thundering voice ripped through the clearing like an undeniable order, and from there, several cats sprung to catch up with the two escaping rogues, racing after the already departing cats. Palewhisker darted after, huffing irritably.

Yet Adderheart simply slipped into the ground, unwilling to leave, unwilling to stay, not knowing where to go. A familiar panic was rising and he had no idea what to do. *Cats don't deserve that. Or this.* His gaze darted to the blood and immediately he wanted to vomit everywhere. *How come everyone's so bad in this Clan? How come we can't have one good cat?*

And just like that, as a panicked silence had settled over the group, Coalbelly stepped out into the clearing.

chapter thirty nine

"You," Cougarstar snapped, lifting his tail to point at the she-cat. "This is all your fault!"

She reared back, casting him a confused and vexed look. "What did I do?" She asked as she looked back into the den, and from behind her, Twilightcloud trotted out. Both black-furred she-cats glanced to the leader, who stomped a paw furiously down on the ground.

"You let them get all healed and then they just left! If they would've been more injured, it wouldn't have happened!" He flared, tail whipping. "And you just stood by and let her do it!" He looked at Twilightcloud, fury clearly written all over his expression.

The crowd had not dissipated. Really, it had only grown, for the cats who'd only gone a little in the journey to try and retrieve the rogues had reappeared, though Palewhisker had yet to return. However, the tom soon enough skidded into camp with irritation scrawled across his features, but at seeing the anger within Cougarstar's gaze, the deputy simply slipped into the crowd.

And apparently, that meant right next to him.

Adderheart shifted uncomfortably, unable to stop the scent of blood from completely invading his senses. Swallowing a huff as though to get rid of the smell, his tail twitched back and forth beneath him, but he tried his best to try and breathe normally. As long as he kept on breathing, then all would be well, right? As long as he tried to keep things going like normal, it'd be fine.

"This is all your fault!" Cougarstar flashed out again, tail now thumping as he stalked forward.

"We had to heal them," Twilightcloud answered evenly, her features simple as she looked back to the leader. His maw dropped.

"You really didn't. You didn't! You only wanted to because... well I

don't know why, because you're both idiots, really," he spat shortly after, tail lashing as he shook his head. "When my healers are both stupid, what am I meant to do—"

"So you would've wanted to get information from a corpse?" Coalbelly interrupted, stepping forward as the leader whipped, baring his teeth in her face. "Because all that information you got would've been completely gone if I wouldn't have gone and healed them."

"They're *rogues*, idiot! Obviously I know that, do you think I'm stupid?" Cougarstar barked, "where's Palewhisker and everyone else? Are the rogues back?"

The deputy rose from beside him and stepped forward, answering, "The rogues got away, but we tried our best. I don't know where they went."

"Send a patrol after them," he ordered, "because our stupid healers went and healed them so they could get away."

"I only used cobwebs! I didn't even use herbs!" Coalbelly snapped, and the leader whipped to her and glared.

"I don't really think that matters. You used *some* form of herbs on him," he spat in response, "now don't talk to me, now that you've ruined it all. Go back in your den and don't come out even when you want to."

"You can't do that!" Twilightcloud protested, ears harshly twitching. Her eyes were bright with confusion and irritation was hidden within her light yellow depths. "We didn't do anything wrong!"

"Go," Cougarstar ordered.

Coalbelly's tail quickly whipped against Twilightcloud's foreleg, and the two healers cast each other a look before turning and walking off to the healers' den. Though, their heads were tipped up and their tails lightly brushed the ground, gait steady and almost confident before they disappeared within the den.

"Now go get a patrol," the leader snapped, turning back to

Palewhisker, "before they get away."

Palewhisker rose with a huff, gaze sweeping the area. "Marigoldcry, Freckletuft, Antwhisper, you three," he started, tail waving harshly as all three cats rose and obediently trotted forward. "Go find the rogues."

The three cats took off, tails whisking in the entrance before they ultimately dissipated. Cougarstar turned back to the Clan, fury clearly sprawled across and within his green gaze as he spoke harshly to everyone once more.

"If we manage to find more rogues, don't let that happen again, got it?"

His gaze drifted to Pantherleap and want to protect the tom sprung harshly and fiercely up within Adderheart, yet he consoled himself. *I can't right now, it's not the time.* His tail twitched sharply yet he kept himself rooted to the ground, managing to take a few deep breaths.

"I said, *got it*?"

"Yes," the Clan responded at once, unwilling to leave the air empty with his question.

Yet with the answer given, his head dipped in a sharp motion, and he turned around as he waved his tail almost dismissively. Upon seeming to remember that the Clan had yet to be dismissed verbally, he turned back around.

"Dismissed," he spat with a finalizing glare, sending it straight at someone in the crowd.

Wait, that was directed at me.

Panic quickly rose, grasping around the tom with a harsh grip that he couldn't shake off. His heart instantly began to beat faster and his gaze swept the clearing, sweeping his tail to conceal his now-shaking figure. But Adderheart felt his body lifting and his paws turning, and he could almost grasp why he was flipping directions, and he could nearly understand why he launched himself out of

camp.

Tears bubbled at the edges of his gaze. *Why does he hate me? What did I do? I'm the one who found the rogues, I thought that was a good thing!* Frustration and hatred quickly surged within him and he eventually collapsed beneath a tree, attempting to keep in a string of sobs.

It's not my fault, I didn't do anything, it's not my fault!

Attempts to help himself fell to the ground like the uncontrollable tears that now flowed from his gaze, and upon hearing pawsteps, panic quickly spiraled within him. He couldn't be seen by anyone, he wasn't allowed to cry and especially not after a stupid, stupid glare from the leader. Why did it matter, anyways? He was just dumb.

Stumbling swiftly to his paws, he looked down at the dampened ground and a new wave of frustration surged. *Why am I crying?* He didn't want to think about it anymore and so he harshly shoved himself forward and away from the pawsteps. He couldn't have anyone seeing him.

This is dumb, you're dumb, stop crying, stop... The thoughts trailed off and he could only cry all the more. He didn't like feeling out of control, not when he needed to just stop and get up and pretend he'd been hunting. Not when crying was dumb. *All he did was look at me. Why is this such a big deal?* His breath came in heaving sobs before he lifted a paw and harshly shoved at his blurry gaze.

Huffing harshly, he rose and forced himself to stagger away, tail whisking harshly in the air. *Why is this such a big deal?* The words rang in his head like a familiar bell that would never leave and never stop chiming, thinking it was doing good yet really, it was only doing the opposite; causing harm, causing more tears.

Sniffling several times, the tom paused at a tree before scoring his claws down it with a horrible fury lit within his dark gray eyes. *It's not.* His paws steadied as he continued to walk, tears still forming within his eyes, red still rimming his gaze, yet it faded mostly, now replaced with a flaming fire that was almost impossible to put out.

Coughing momentarily, Adderheart lifted a paw to swipe angrily at his maw. *It is!* His thoughts continued on and on, fading in and out of truth and lies, unable to try and solidify a line between the two evils that hung over his life like a dark stormcloud. He swerved around a rock, glancing to the pine needles surrounding it before continuing.

Trying to blink away the tears, his thin figure continue to slip forward. *It's not. It's not! It's really, really not because Cougarstar gets mad at cats all the time and you don't matter. You got the rogues, you did a good thing for him, this doesn't matter at all. Now stop overreacting and stop walking and just start hunting before a patrol stumbles along!*

The string of thoughts that quickly sprung from his head didn't silence his running brain but it didn't exactly allow it to keep going. *Stop yelling at yourself.* Tears blurred the edges of his dark gray gaze, fresh and ready to spill right over whenever they wanted. *And crying is fine.*

It's not, he thought in response, almost a snap as he looked down at his own paws as he momentarily stopped walking. He glared down, stamping his front paw with frustrations only reserved for himself before continuing, yet a scent rose from the ground below and he had to stop.

"The border," he realized aloud, and upon recognizing he'd done this, the tom's eyes swiftly swept around. Lifting a paw and swiping at his gaze once again, the tom quickly hurried away and simply just watched.

Should I mark it?

It seemed to be the obvious choice but he knew the rogues didn't care about whether or not the borders were marked. They would harass the Clan regardless, they would try and get more prisoners for more information anyway, and most importantly, they would do anything to gain any sort of knowledge of SageClan.

And why did *he* have to mark it? He was just a warrior and all of the warriors just mindlessly followed Cougarstar. Except him,

evidently. Things would still be the same if he marked it, though. It didn't matter if he marked it or not because even if he did, he would still be with Pantherleap. He would still like toms and he would still be lying to everyone.

He would still be lying to Willowdapple.

Harshly flickering his tail, he approached the border and swiftly took time to mark it.

Darkness had taken the territory with a swift yet gentle paw, and within the sky the moon had slipped up and up, attempting to get higher and higher. And eventually, it settled down in the middle of the sky with all of its starry friends surrounding it as though to comfort it from the cold, biting winds that skipped and twirled around.

Leaf-bare had finally and icily seated itself in the middle of the world and from there, everything had to fit to make room for large amounts of snow. The territory had little snow, now, and the camp was fully empty of it now. But that wouldn't last too long, for as the tom continued to mark the border, clouds shuffled into the sky, glaring down at him.

These clouds eventually coughed out small sprinklings of snowflakes, and as one plopped itself on his forehead, Adderheart's skull tipped upward. His eyes were still rimmed with red, and the snowflake that soon enough fell upon his paw made him stop in his work and turn back around. *Did it really start snowing that quickly?*

Sniffing the air, the tom found it drenched in moisture, and he quickly finished the portion he'd been working on. Casting a glance at the clouds, he found that the moon was perfectly covered, shielded from the gazes of any prying cats. Turning, the thin tom scented the air again and a chilly feeling entered his bones, seeping into his pelt.

My scent track is gone, and that means Sola and Salem's are, too.

Briefly, the thought of simply running away entered his mind. He could get away and nobody could notice or know how. Snow

continued to pile at his paws, creating a small yet thick layer of snow upon the ground that was clear enough to see. The pale-furred tom felt as though running away would almost be cowardly but wouldn't it solve all of his problems?

No, he thought, *it's just running away from them all.*

And so he turned back to where he thought the camp was, tail swishing harshly back and forth as he waited for something else to happen. Maybe some form of sign or something, so he could know he was doing something correctly. Or maybe instead someone would rush by and tell him he had to leave because it was the only reasonable solution.

Though nothing happened. Air continued to swirl icily around, biting at his maw and snapping at his paws, and the snow continued to fall, as though it was a blanket whose only goal was to make the world completely quiet. The trees still whisked nearby, inching only a little in each direction before a new layer of snow would slam them down.

There was nowhere else to go, so Adderheart began to head back to camp.

As he did so, the snow only picked up. The winds now whipped around his figure, easily making his pelt fluff up as it plucked warmth from his body. Darkening quickly, clouds above swirled themselves into ominous puffy monsters, glaring down at the world below that was too warm for their liking, and so they sent a clap of thunder upon the world.

First, a familiar panic spiraled up inside of Adderheart. If he couldn't get back in time, then where would he go and what would he do? He couldn't just go and search for the rogues or see if they would invite him, and Sola and Salem would know who he was. And the original patrol... they would probably know, too.

Because of this, he tried to run faster, but the continual falling of snow was getting in the way. It was piling quicker now, and he cast a look to the trees as he awkwardly hopped over another mound of the cold, white substance. *If I can climb, I'll still get snowed on, but if I*

jump from trunk to trunk, maybe it'll be easier?

It was clear from past experiences he'd had that his climbing skills were not that refined, but it didn't matter, because he quickly sprung up and toward the nearest tree. It happened to be rather tall and so that one was easy to clamp to the side of. With a huff, the tom sunk his claws into its side, tail swishing as though to help him gain balance.

Quickly surveying the area around him, he began to awkwardly jump from tree to tree.

It wasn't necessarily something that was time efficient, but he seemed to be clearly soaring above the snow and allowing his body to slip right below the branches. He knocked a few every now and then, but it was nothing a quick hop to the nearest tree couldn't do, and even then, he could still hear the snow falling behind him.

As he traveled, though, he noticed the rising snow — it inched closer and closer to wherever he happened to be trying to jump to — and attempted to speed up. However, as he twisted awkwardly jumping to a new tree, his figure seemed to simply splay out into the air, and it was all over as he instantly plummeted straight into the snow.

Suddenly, everything was cold. The harsh ground beneath him was cold, and it was almost unbearable in a way that caused him to immediately gasp from the impact of the fall. Pain blossomed in his back and he struggled to move, awkwardly splayed on his back so that it was nearly impossible to get up, and the snow that continued to layer atop him.

I'm stuck.

Panic leapt within him and locked his limbs. He didn't know what else to do. He was completely and totally stuck within the snow's cold confines, and it wasn't like he could just get up to get out. The snow rose in tall walls around him, and even though they weren't all that tall in general, his figure was down on the ground, and so the perspective of all of it was completely messed up.

Struggling to breathe steadily, he looked around as though it would help. Using his front paws to whip himself forward and out, he managed to shove his face into a section of the snow, and he recoiled with a snarl. However, he soon enough sunk his claws into the ground below and pressed himself up and forward, and from there continued as best as he could. Huffing harshly, the pale tom shoved himself out of the snow.

Finally being free was strange, yet the panic hadn't faded from earlier. Instead of quick-moving though, his brain was slow, as if it was having difficulties separating basic things from others of the same. However, he did attempt to keep on going, picking his way through the snow, lifting his paws and placing them meaningfully.

The moon peered down at him with a half-glare, its features concealed with clouds that had almost flitted away from the light source. It was strong in size, though it was clear that the clouds had been around it for a little, as to ensure that visibility was low within the world when it needed such the most.

And eventually, the camp's entrance loomed in the distance.

chapter forty

From the world outside, a pale sun rose into the sky.

It allowed the sky to turn peachy and the clouds blushed immediately, looking away as they skittered out of the way from the warmth that suddenly blossomed across the sky. However, it wasn't enough to fully chase away the darkness of the night, and instead, it only converted it to a slightly warmer and lighter blue, slowly working away at it.

Yet the world below was something that the world above had yet to see. As soon as the sun noted the snow, it sighed and chided the clouds for making such a mess. It wasn't as much snow as before, of course, but it was still snow, and snow meant that the sun had to work extra hard to melt it all. It was cleared from the camp, yet that didn't mean it wasn't anywhere else.

At the edges of SageClan's camp, snow was clearly piled up from where cats had shoved it up against the walls as though to get it away from the middle. It was out of the way now, and perhaps it served as something to protect from the icy breezes that were dancing all around the territory. Working swiftly, the winds picked up small bits of the snow and brought it along with them.

And a particularly cold breeze was what woke Adderheart.

He didn't know what he was meant to do. *Am I supposed to hunt?* He had a feeling that would end in nothing, yet his stomach growled loudly and seemed to beg for some form of prey. Glancing around at the warriors' den, he found everyone else asleep. Except for the few empty nests, the warriors of the Clan were still tired, it appeared.

Dustshade, Runningfoot, Finchtansy, and Briargaze were all out of their nests. Long forgotten, they were likely out in the territory, hunting. And that meant that Palewhisker was awake, too, or maybe Cougarstar was just unreasonably taking charge, as usual.

Carefully, he picked his way from the den and gazed around as though to take an inventory of what was happening.

The camp was, unsurprisingly, empty. Nobody besides him was in it, yet he could smell the scents from earlier. The four warriors had likely shared some prey, considering the blood patch on the ground that the pale warrior walked carefully to, and at this thought, he quickly looked up and over to where the fresh-kill pile was.

Padding a bit closer, his tail sharply swished. *Empty.* So they'd had the last piece of prey together and then either waited for something to happen, and such had been them being assigned a patrol, or immediately after eating, they'd gone and decided to hunt. He supposed it made sense, yet in the same thread, that almost meant that none of the high-ranks necessarily had to be awake. Only one thought entered his mind.

So then this is the perfect time for Pantherleap and me to talk?

But it was dangerous still, wasn't it? If he woke someone up as he was trying to get to the tom, then it was all over. And even if he didn't, he could still easily mess up and make everything worse than it was. Tail swishing nervously, his stomach grumbled irritably as he shifted. Looking down to his paws, he seemed to glare before simply just settling back.

Sitting beside the warrior's den maybe wasn't the best thing either, as the minor noises that would inevitably occur could wake up some of the cats within the den. Upon realizing this, he huffed a little, clearing his throat before he headed out into the camp. Yet all he did was sit down at the edge of the camp and wrap his tail over his paws, blinking a few times as he watched.

Eventually, the camp seemed to wake up.

Marigoldcry was one of the first up from the warrior's den, slipping out as though she was the wind. Poppyfur followed yet she appeared more excited, a clear skip in her step as she grinned brightly. Lifting a paw to point at the snow at the edges of the camp, the latter warrior appeared to jump a little yet Marigoldcry's thick whitish tail flickered as though to dismiss it.

"...rogues," came a mutter from Marigoldcry.

"Why don't we just follow their bloody tracks?" Poppyfur asked loudly, looking to her curiously.

"...covered them...can't do that." Marigoldcry's reply was simply irritated as she looked to Poppyfur as though the she-cat was dumb.

"Just move the snow then?" Poppyfur pressed further and Marigoldcry looked at her with an ultimately confused expression.

"We can't do that," she answered. Now her replies were getting louder as she shook her skull harshly. "We can't...snow just to find tracks. And even if we did, it wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

Marigoldcry strode forward toward the center of camp. "Doesn't matter, just... don't bring it up."

Birdwish and Galewind exited the warrior's den shortly after, and Streamfang inched after the two. The three cats began to chatter quietly, yet Freckletuft was swift to slip from the den and seat herself down toward the back of the camp.

Poppyfur swiftly headed over to Birdwish and Galewind.

"What're we going...rogues?" Poppyfur's voice was quieter now, yet it was still clear enough to be able to tell that the she-cat was still talking.

"It's not something *we* have to deal with," muttered Streamfang, who stood nearby.

"Then who...?" Birdwish commented, glancing at the thick-furred she-cat.

"Cougarstar, probably," answered Galewind.

"But *we're* the ones who have to go and find the camp," Marigoldcry interrupted.

"We can't go by ourselves," Galewind pointed out. "And besides, it'll be impossible to find. Everyone in this camp has no way of telling where it is."

"Obviously," Streamfang interrupted.

"That doesn't mean we should just give up on looking for it. They're clearly willing to come and attack us," Marigoldcry countered. "We can't just let them attack us."

"We're not," Birdwish mewed, shaking her skull. "We're just not actively seeking them out. It'll just make them think we want them to come if we continue to obsess over their camp."

"That makes no sense," Marigoldcry opposed swiftly. "The more we look for them, the less willing they'll be to come to us."

Galewind looked at her and shook his head. "I don't think that's right though. The more we look for them, the fewer cats will be in camp."

"What?" Marigoldcry commented. *How do you not know what that means?*

"If we send more cats out to look for them," he explained, "that means there will be fewer cats in camp, therefore making it easier for them to attack or find us due to all the scent markings around the territory from us searching."

Marigoldcry's muzzle scrunched before she muttered, "I don't think that's quite right."

Streamfang looked away with her muzzle wrinkling. She spotted Adderheart and her muzzle further wrinkled. With a carefully concealed expression, the pale-furred warrior inched backward, a horrible chill running down his spine.

Yet she said only a simple statement, tail twitching all the while, "Doesn't matter. We have to go hunting before much else anyways. We can't have our Clanmates dying."

She opened her maw to say something else before realizing what

she'd said. Her eyes rounded momentarily before she swiftly rose to her paws and slipped out of the camp without another word.

Birchpaw. Brindlebreeze.

A frown rippled across Adderheart's features yet he allowed it to dissipate. He couldn't do that. Not now.

"What about yesterday?" Birdwish asked quietly. "They attacked us again and we had sent lots of cats out."

They attacked us again?

"Nobody... was that badly injured," Marigoldcry answered, "and even if they were, it's not a big deal. We have plenty of herbs."

But that's not true. Herbs aren't doing well in the first place and leaf-bare will only make them worse.

Several other warriors flooded into camp a few moments later, including Fernfall and Fluffyflame. Bumblepuddle followed, alongside Swallowripple. Beetlepath exited a little slower than the other warriors, yet another swarm of them followed them, chattering.

"...rogues!"

"...yesterday...makes no sense...herbs."

"...we do."

And then, as though summoned by a call that wasn't spoken, Cougarstar exited his den and immediately jumped onto the Highrock. Thumping his tail loudly against the rock, he straightened his shoulders before looking down upon the Clan that was half-gathered.

"Everyone!" He asserted loudly, "please get over here! I have an important announcement to make!"

The Clan stopped talking almost as soon as they had started and everyone shuffled into a strange circle-ish position. Adderheart

stuck to the back of the crowd, ears half-flattened as he slowly lifted his skull to look at the leader. He looked... angry. *That's not a surprise.*

Adderheart spotted Pantherleap within the crowd and despite his strong urges to go and get over to him, he knew he couldn't. It wouldn't give them a good reputation, it would be suspicious, it was a bad idea. And so he didn't, even though he really wanted to.

"Yesterday, there was yet another attack on one of our patrols. Luckily, we managed to fight them all off without much of a concern, but we did get confirmation that those two cats that we had returned to their camp and relayed all of the information."

Cougarstar's voice split the clearing like a knife and everyone seemed to shift back. Yet, Marigoldcry seemed to do the opposite, in that she leaned forward with her lips drawing up almost defensively. Fernfall, too, and Shrewclaw did similarly.

The latter's gaze seemed to shine as the leader looked over the crowd. It was as though he was surveying who was available for certain things, yet really, certain things that he was looking for seemed concealed within a darkened gaze. His tail swished momentarily as the crowd seemed to murmur loudly.

"...rogues?" He couldn't detect the voice but it was angry. Fury bubbled deep within the tones of whoever it was, yet it almost sounded feminine.

"Yes! I told...that wouldn't...!" That was certainly more masculine yet he still couldn't detect whoever it was.

"...dumb...attack them before...us." However, that one was more recognizable. It was clear and almost certainly Willowdapple's voice. Adderheart didn't need anything more than her tone to know it was her. It was clear, it was obvious, and he immediately wanted to throw up.

He didn't want to hear her voice and he didn't want to speak to her. He didn't want to see her or her kits. The kits she claimed were theirs, but they weren't. They weren't his. *They're not mine!* A spark

of anxiety lit him but he forced it down.

Swallowing nervously, he closed his eyes before opening them within a moment as the voices from cats nearby continued to swirl around, almost louder than before.

"...do that!" That voice was sharp, as though the cat expected an outcome at that moment.

"...attack us," Birdwish's tone cut through the rest of the murmurs, "and if we...it'll...not fair...if what happened...is...then it's not..."

"...exactly."

"...see?" Birdwish commented in reply.

He couldn't tell quite what she was saying but he was able to grasp a general idea. Yet really it proved useless in the grand scheme of attempting to figure out what was going on within the Clan. He looked back to Cougarstar and the leader seemed almost frustrated with the lack of cats listening to him.

"...yesterday!" Marigoldcry snapped, "it's just...!"

"Don't...upset," another calm voice interrupted, and Adderheart could almost sense that the cat had shaken their skull in response.

"...my fault!" Marigoldcry spat again. "...and it's...fair. I won't stand...!"

The she-cat was angry, and that was clear. Her tone was as sharp as ever, like flint scrubbing against a mere piece of stone, and the result was a horrible noise. Adderheart's ears twitched harshly yet he tried his best to hear what they were saying. *Stop eavesdropping.*

I'm not eavesdropping. He fired back at the little voice within his head that insisted otherwise. *It's fine to listen in on a conversation that they're having in camp. It's not a big deal.* He took a deep breath, ears twitching, looking back down to his paws.

"...dumb! That's dumb. I can't...! And not even...?" That was Galewind. *When did he rejoin this conversation?*

"You don't *have* to! It's...! You're a...not a...and it's dumb...we can't do that...not by..." Birdwish shot back in reply, shaking her skull. "And don't say...you know that doesn't...sense, Marigoldcry."

"We have to go and attack them. They'll attack...first!" She persisted, "and the...then the more...!"

Over the crowd, he could see her rising to her paws, furiously thumping her tail as she approached Birdwish, hanging over her as though she had power within the Clan. As though she was worth something. As though she had authority.

"...over me. That's just dumb on..." Birdwish calmly replied; all anger had faded.

"...can't keep doing this. You were just angry! Come on! Aren't you...fight for your point?"

"It's not fair...can't keep...not a leader."

"I'm more of a leader than you'd *ever* be! I'm strong!"

What if she's right? Birdwish seemed calm overall. Didn't that mean she'd be better in general? Or maybe it was just something weird. What could be weird, though? It didn't make sense, what Marigoldcry was saying. Right?

"...don't do this."

"They do! I know they do. They know when it's good...does it! He's a good...you know that too!"

"...arguing."

They weren't arguing, were they? Or maybe it was just all scattered? Just like all the thoughts within Adderheart's skull, well, at least he assumed so. Each thought jumped far too swiftly to another and another as they desperately sprinted away from him.

"...not! We're having a discussion!"

"We're...*you're* yelling at me."

Was that even Birdwish? Maybe it wasn't. Maybe Galewind had slipped into the conversation somehow, just like how his breathing had slipped away from him. It was hard to breathe. It was like he was inhaling sludge. What was sludge? He didn't know. It was hard. Everything was too hard.

"We're *not*!"

Everything was too hard to define from anything. It was all pressing too close to him. Everyone and everything didn't know how to stop pressing against him. *Why are there so many cats next to me? Get away, get away—*

"Stop *talking*!"

With a gasp that was maybe a little too loud, Adderheart looked up at Cougarstar as he fumed, watching the ground. The crowd went silent and several cats seemed almost to bow their skulls in response to the leader's angry tone. Cougarstar finally stomped his paw once more before seeming to continue his speech.

"I'm trying to talk here. Stop idly chatting and listen to *me*!"

"Because Sola and Salem got all of the information back, that means they know where our camp is, to some degree. They know somewhat of our herb stores, they know how many cats we have, and a lot of other things I would've preferred they didn't know," he growled shortly after, leaning over the Highrock.

Everyone simply stared back up at him.

Huffing, he snapped, "And it's all of your faults. It never should have happened in the first place but it did! And what will I do about this? Send several patrols to look for their camp. They know about us? I *demand* to know the same about them." His lips drew back. "Pretend to be taken in as a prisoner. We'll look for you after a while and we'll get you and we'll get some information."

Hostilities suddenly seemed to leap up within the air, claws unsheathed, teeth bared. Nobody seemed to want to do this. It was evident by the bared teeth and the sharp glazes that suddenly

popped up in cats' gazes, and similarly, the fluffed pelts betrayed true feelings.

"I demand this occurs soon." Here he stopped and harshly shoved his paw up into the air as though to make a point. "Palewhisker will sort patrols immediately, and there's time for other things to happen. Get into groups right now or go hunting."

His words flooded from his maw like he was spitting out orders that would go in one ear and out the other.

Yet nobody in the crowd really moved. They all simply watched as he fumed more and more, yet still, some leaned forward. Marigoldcry's ears perked as she looked up to him, and his ears harshly pinned as his muzzle opened once more. Another venomous order flooded from more as he looked around, his eyes two knives.

"So? What're you standing there for?" Venom and fury were deeply woven into his voice as Cougarstar's skull swept around, his eyes looking around for someone who was going to do something.

The leader sprung off the Highrock.

"Aren't you going to protect the Clan?"

The Clan's not protecting me.

chapter forty one

Selfish.

Immediately, the thought flitted into his skull, and he tried his best to push it away. He knew that it was maybe a little selfish. Maybe a little, but it was fine because he had a hard life as it was. And Cougarstar's life was easy, so he just... was being unreasonable.

Your life is so easy! You have a wonderful Clan who constantly does things to ensure that everyone lives and doesn't die. You have a nice tom who loves you. How dare you?

It was only his brain making up dumb things. If he said one thing wrong, then he'd easily be cast out of the Clan and probably to die out in the snow alone. And even more so, if anyone said one thing wrong, they, too, would be cast from the Clan. So it wasn't wonderful. Was it?

And the tom who loved him did love him. *I know that.* A small spark of guilt filled him at the momentary thought that entered his skull. *Now I do.* Of course, he knew that the tom had always loved him but it had just been scary and uncertain... he wasn't allowed to love him; neither of them was allowed to love each other. *So it's not wonderful.*

I'm just making things up.

It had to be great because if it wasn't, then why was everyone so happy and nice within it? Yet this thought was quickly destroyed for it simply made no sense. *Cats have to be unhappy in SageClan. Every high rank is so mean.* The two dark-furred healers popped into his skull and he supposed that they were an exception.

But what if I'm wrong? What if this is a good Clan?

Anxiety continued to fill him, as though he were a bottle and the constant worry was some form of liquid. Perhaps melted snow, and

all the things around caused it to snow all the time, no matter the weather outside. His ears harshly twitched as he looked down at his paws, attempting to take a deep breath as though to calm the now-swift stirring within his belly.

And in the million moments that all of this seemed to run its track throughout his skull, it was only a mere few seconds in reality. All that was within his head seemed to be a lot slower than what was actually happening yet as he looked up once more, he saw Cougarstar once more.

Their gazes met and Adderheart had no choice but to level it, attempting to conceal his off-pace breathing, attempting to conceal the clear concern in his dark gray gaze, attempting to conceal anything that the leader would have disagreed with. And apparently, it worked.

"I'll go and look," claimed Marigoldcry immediately, stepping forward with her thick-furred chin rise. Her bright yellowy-amber gaze sharpened as she allowed it to drift and meet Cougarstar's, the tom's focus soon enough snapping away to settle on the she-cat.

"Palewhisker, get her a patrol," the leader ordered with an approving dip of his skull. The tom mentioned lifted his own head and tipped it before he swiftly rose to his paws. "Fernfall, you lead one as well."

"Dustshade," Palewhisker started, looking around for the warrior. He was seated near the exit of the camp, likely due to his patrol. When had he come back? "And Fluffyflame, Swallowripple, and Streamfang. All of you are on Marigoldcry's patrol. You are to look for prey near the borders and the camp."

All four cats rose diligently, and all the more seemed to shift. Everything was moving and shifting around Adderheart yet he couldn't grasp onto anything. His own thoughts slipped by too quickly, his paws felt like two slabs of ice, and his back was strictly straightened.

"Pantherleap, lead a patrol," Cougarstar ordered as he slipped around the tom, and Adderheart immediately looked over. The

senior warrior rose to his paws with a small exhale and looked around. Only that was able to melt the ice beneath him a little. Only that name was able to steady his thoughts for half a moment.

"Can I decide my own patrol?"

"Sure, just look for the camp, got it?" Cougarstar continued after a momentary pause, striding confidently around the camp as he tossed a sharp look to Palewhisker.

The deputy called, "Russetpelt, Freckletuft, Mudstripe, and Bumblepuddle, you're all on Fernfall's patrol."

Russetpelt rose to his paws first and it was at that moment that Adderheart could see several cuts and scratches littered upon his pelt. Briefly, he wondered why the tom was being picked for yet another patrol where he had gotten injured previously. He failed to understand the logic, but often there was no logic to understand.

Suddenly, Pantherleap's presence popped into existence beside him.

Adderheart jumped, the words of Cougarstar and Palewhisker fading into a familiar background that only consisted of yelling and shouting. All things focused immediately upon the tom's gaze, so deep and dark and a wonderful green shade that only he could truly make work.

Pantherleap's tail harshly slapped Adderheart's flank, and he snapped upward, immediately springing to his paws. "Come on, you're on my patrol," he told him, eyes narrowing momentarily. "Were you not listening?"

Anxiety quickly sprung up in his throat and dried it out. "I was," he rasped, and immediately he jumped as though he was surprised at his own tone. "I suppose I hadn't heard you," he added, attempting to quell the slight shaking of his voice as he looked to Pantherleap, trying to even his stare. "Who else is on the patrol, then?"

"Should've been listening," Pantherleap muttered, shaking his skull as he cast the warrior a look before taking a few large bounds off toward the exit of the camp. Several of the other patrols were

already gathered there, yet Pantherleap was off to the side.

He's just doing it because Cougarstar's here. He's your mate. He loves you.

He attempted to smush the anxiety that continued to swirl within him as he rose to his paws. Finchtansy was standing near him, and he briefly wondered if she was on the patrol because Pantherleap had picked her, or the deputy had cut in. Poppyfur had seated herself beside the she-cat, her ears perked.

Adderheart approached with a mildly curious dark gray gaze but seeing that Poppyfur was insistent on chattering away, the emotion drained from his eyes as Pantherleap whipped his tail as though to call everyone together.

"I find it necessary that we hunt," he started, and immediately a swamp of relief crushed down on the pale tom. They weren't going to look for the rogues... good. That was good. "All three of you are considered good at it, that is why I picked you after all... it shouldn't be too hard."

"I thought we were supposed to look for the rogue's camp," Poppyfur commented curiously.

"We are," Pantherleap answered evenly, turning to look at the she-cat. "But if nobody goes hunting, there won't be any easy way to attack them when we do, because we'll all be starving."

Poppyfur seemed confused still. "But hunting wasn't what we were supposed to do."

"I know that," came the tom's response. He took a short inhale before swishing his tail as though to silence her. "But *my* concern isn't the camp. I know that one of the other patrols will somehow and inevitably find it because if there's several searching, we don't need another. It'll waste energy."

"What if Cougarstar finds out?" She asked, frowning. "Wouldn't he be mad?"

Well, yeah. But if he doesn't *find out, then it's no problem.*

"He's bound to find out anyways," Pantherleap answered. "There will be new prey in the camp and he'll notice that unless we give it to cats as soon as we get back."

Oh yeah, Adderheart thought, almost laughing. *I forgot about that.*

"We can do that if you want," Finchtansy offered. "I don't mind giving prey to others. Willowdapple and her kits probably need some, and I think we could all share something too."

"What about Cougarstar and his mate?" Poppyfur prompted.

"They'll get prey," Finchtansy assured her with a dismissive flick of her tail. Poppyfur nodded as the curiosities drained from her features, seeming satisfied with the answer that was vague as it was.

"We'll split into pairs." Pantherleap looked at all four cats.

Pairs. That was good. That meant that the two could be paired if he wanted them to be. Adderheart wondered if he'd allow the group to choose or just pick himself. *He told me that he doesn't want to make anything too obvious. That all my visits... no, that all my... my...* He stopped thinking, thoughts trailing off. But if Pantherleap picked all by himself, would he still pair...?

"Adderheart and I can pair together," he stated after a momentary pause, "and you two obviously can pair together." He waved his tail slightly at Poppyfur and Finchtansy.

More and more relief seemed to stack upon Adderheart. If he were an ocean, then the life rafts of relief were suddenly popping up all over its usually dark and cold surface. Pleased, the tom gave a nod but did his best to hide his clearly positive emotions. To the rest of them, Pantherleap was just another warrior, just another cat, just another face in the crowd of those who were unwilling to stand up to Cougarstar.

But little did they all know that, well, it seemed like this patrol was standing up to him all by itself. Adderheart hadn't realized it at first but it had Finchtansy, whose company he enjoyed, and Poppyfur.

She was okay overall he supposed, but one of the warriors that talked a lot, and so it would allow him to go silent as she rambled and rambled.

Furthermore, it was only a hunting patrol. All others were for the rogues. Yet the one that Pantherleap had? No. It was hunting. And that was good. Adderheart watched as Poppyfur grinned brightly with a nod forming, and Finchtansy dipped her skull in acceptance to the earlier words.

"Where will we hunt?" Poppyfur questioned after a second's pause. "Near the borders?"

"Likely, yes," Pantherleap evenly replied as he turned to watch the rest of the patrols leave. "We'll let them go first, and you may hunt wherever you want, really. Just remember that you're on a patrol and maybe mark the border a little after you catch something."

"What if we don't find anything?" Poppyfur asked, head tipping.

"You will," he reassured her. "And if you don't, then your partner certainly will. Make sure to look under and in the burrows for prey that's hiding from the cold weather."

"Shall we walk out together?" Adderheart asked, immediately regretting such an action as he looked over to the entrance. Other patrols were still leaving, unable to get things sorted and unable to get all the information correct between each other.

"Just wait until the rest leave," Pantherleap commented, pointing his tail at the entrance once more before he paused, simply waiting.

Silence settled upon the group, thick yet soft as though it was a pleasant blanket. It was one similar to the midday cloth within the sky, soft but dense as it glared down at many of the cats below. Chilly winds skipped by as though they were little kits, playing with each other as they chucked mossballs back and forth.

Yet, the snow around made it hard enough so that they had to hop up and around the banks of snow, and in turn, they bit the paws and the forelegs of the cats around. Shifting momentarily,

Adderheart continued to wait for the rest of the groups to finish. It was taking far too long for his liking anyways.

Though there was nothing more to do. All the patrol had to do was wait until they were able to leave, somehow, finally. And eventually, a voice broke into the warrior's train of thought.

"So, where do we think we're going today?"

Cougarstar wove easily around his brother as he stared at the group, his eyes sharp yet almost curious as though he was truly interested in where they were going.

"The border," Poppyfur commented happily. "Pantherleap said we were—"

"—going to explore where all the evidence points to," Pantherleap interrupted, casting an even look at the she-cat. "And you'll have to wait and see if we find where that is."

"Oh, is that so?" Cougarstar commented, carefully slipping to stand in front of the tom. "And what was Poppyfur going to say?"

"Just what he did," she reported with a smile, ears perking.

Adderheart couldn't help but hold his breath, waiting for the leader to figure it out, waiting for something to happen, waiting for something terrible and awful and horrible to happen. *He has to know his warrior's skills, right? And he has to know that Poppyfur wouldn't do that. Right? Right?*

"Cougarstar!" A call split the clearing, and the leader turned around with a sharp gaze.

Coalbelly stood in the middle of the camp, Twilightcloud positioned behind her. Both dark-furred healers had a carefully concealed expression, one seemingly coated in the darkness of their own pelts, but somehow still illuminated by the brightness of the sun above.

"What?" Cougarstar snapped, turning around to see both healers. Visibly, he grew angrier; his ears flickered harshly before flattening, his green eyes immediately turned into flaming leaves, and his

muzzle drew back in half a snarl as he waited for a reply.

"The meeting?" Coalbelly's brown eyes leveled with the leader and the light yellow gaze of her apprentice seemed to even out, too. The leader's fur lifted, and he shook his skull with a strangely powerful harshness.

"I know about the meeting, *Coalbelly*," he spat in response as though her name was some form of curse against the world. Yet the she-cat didn't flinch and only continued to stare at him, blinking several times.

"I know you know about the meeting, Cougarstar," the healer responded, not allowing her voice to grow nearly as venomous as the leader's had. "But your mate, Bearpatch, and—"

The tom stepped forward, claws unsheathing as he hissed, "I know who's waiting!" Upon seeming to realize he was not alone with just the two healers within the clearing, the leader's lips drew back before he spat out a few final words. "I'll join you in a moment."

However, a swift motion from the leader's den allowed Tinydust to dart out of the den and curl tightly around her mate. She purred before nudging him, and the tom looked down to her, startled as his eyes narrowed.

"Come on to the meeting," she murmured softly, nudging his flank as her spine rose, arching her back in a yawn as she muttered, "I'm tired... can you set up our nest?"

"I'm—" he furiously began.

"Come on, come on," she persisted gently, nuzzling his neck before she licked his ear several times, purring softly. "It'll be a good meeting. I can get you something to eat later," she whispered as she trailed her tail down his spine, as though to calm him.

His back arched immediately yet he didn't stretch; instead, he seemed to rigidly nod, tail swishing behind him before he dipped his skull harshly to the healers. With that, the two padded off into the leader's den, pressed against each other. The dark-furred medics

glanced to the empty fresh-kill pile before following.

Pantherleap was swift to lead the group out of camp, and of course, they barely got out of the entrance before Poppyfur began immediately asking questions that seemed to flood from her maw like a river.

"Why was he so angry?"

The question went unanswered.

"And why'd you lie?"

That also went without a reply.

"Hello?"

"Where are we going to find prey?" Finchtansy interrupted, picking her way over a small lump of snow.

Poppyfur frowned at the lack of answers to her continual questioning but didn't say anything else as the group continued, and Pantherleap seemed to consider this for a moment before he replied.

"We can split up to make it easier. Maybe our pawsteps are scaring everything away," he commented, and Adderheart watched as Finchtansy grimaced, but it dissipated instantly.

"Sure," Finchtansy replied, head dipping in a nod. "We can meet up around here?"

"That sounds good," Pantherleap agreed. "See you both later."

The tawny-furred tom launched himself into the bushes, and Adderheart waved his tail in goodbye before following his mate. He was swift to catch up, huffing before he eventually managed to pull himself to an even pace, trotting beside the tom.

Silence enveloped them, but it was a nice, pleasant silence. It was one that shared a million words even though nothing was being spoken, one that shared a million feelings despite not one being

explained. And none of said million feelings needed to be explained.

After a while of padding along and scenting the air, Adderheart lightly moved his tail to find that it had curled around Pantherleap's. The tom's tail brushed against his own, tightly curled yet not so much so that it was restricting. Really, it was freeing. His heart skipped a beat as though it was as excited to be alone with the tom as he was.

It was only a little past midday, yet sunlight still dappled both of their pelts. It patterned itself across the rocks that broke through the snow's layer, and it made intricate patterns across the fluffy white substance. Adderheart couldn't smell anything besides Pantherleap's comforting scent, and all he could hear were the pleasant sounds of the pine tree-clad territory, but that didn't matter.

"Have you smelled any prey yet?" Pantherleap's soft question broke the silence.

"No," he breathed in response. "Have you?"

"No," the tom murmured. "All I can smell is your scent."

He seemed to laugh but it swiftly died in his throat, and he stopped in his tracks. Pantherleap noticed and immediately pressed against him, head tipping as he pressed his skull into Adderheart's neck. A small purr rose before it quickly crackled out and he stepped away, stumbling.

"What? What's wrong?"

Adderheart scented the air again and panic continued to spiral up and up within him. Grasping tighter and tighter and planning to never let go, it grew suddenly intense and he lifted a paw harshly, claws unsheathed as he went to grip his skull.

His mate lurched forward and slammed his paw to the ground, and Adderheart jumped as he looked to him. Fear and panic clearly were visible within his dark gray gaze because Pantherleap nudged him to the ground, tightly curling his tail around him.

"What's wrong? You can tell me."

"Just scent... scent the air."

Pantherleap paused to do so, and as soon as he did, he sprung to his paws. Only three words escaped his maw.

"Milkfrost and Vixenfeather."

chapter forty two

"Where? They can't be around here, I can't... no, they can't," Adderheart couldn't keep the flow of words from his maw as he hurriedly turned around. "They have to be near here... if they're close. If we can scent them then they have..." His words trailed off and he shook his skull sharply.

Pantherleap seemed to straighten his shoulders as he strolled forward, head tipping upward. "Hello? Vixenfeather? Milkfrost?" His words echoed loudly through the area around them and he took a few generous bounds forward. Adderheart could only haphazardly stumble after, huffing as though the very thought of the she-cats was exhausting to him.

"We aren't going to hurt you," the tawny tom clarified loudly, his ears pricking as he continued forward. "We're just questioning why you're here." Silence followed his words. Well, that was until a loud crunching of paws upon snow sounded nearby, and Pantherleap took off into the territory.

"Wait!" Adderheart had nothing more to do than launch himself after his mate, attempting to balance his figure as he awkwardly swerved around a few trees. He tried to ensure he didn't go crashing through the undergrowth, but his head pounded as he tried to follow his mate.

Eventually, he caught up to the warrior. Pantherleap had stopped himself at the border, almost perched upon his paws as though it'd been a swift stop. As though he'd caught himself after nearly passing it. Both of them scented the air around them and found that there was little information within the air. It still smelled like both of the elders. It still smelled like cats and the border in general.

"Hello? Vixenfeather? Milkfrost?" His call rang through the pine trees once more as moments passed, and the world went silent around them. The snow suffocated any other noises. Except for the mild crunching of paws upon crisp snow.

Realization jolted through the warrior, and he turned to his mate in a flash. "They're here... they're here."

"Where? Where?" Pantherleap demanded, though not necessarily rudely. He peered over the border, green eyes squinting as he huffed, pulling himself back. "Where are they?"

"Somewhere around here... I heard— I heard pawsteps. In the snow."

"Are you sure it wasn't a mouse or something?"

"What? No— why would a mouse be above ground...?"

"I don't know. I don't think it's them. They'd make a lot more noise, right, wouldn't they?"

"I don't know!" Adderheart burst out, and regret immediately filled him. "Sorry— sorry," he stammered instantly after, a new wave of anxiety rising within him. "I just— I don't know. I thought... I thought I heard pawsteps in the snow. It didn't sound like a mouse."

Pantherleap looked down at his paws, or perhaps the icy snow right past them. Shifting upon his own paws, Adderheart went silent, not knowing what else to say or do in order to help. If the elders were around, then maybe they were listening in on the conversation. Maybe they knew.

No, it was unlikely. Right? How could they know? Neither of the toms had told anyone within the Clan, and if somehow somebody knew, who was it? And how would the news have reached two elders within a group of rogues? Especially from a Clan that restricted conversation and positive, even neutral interaction, with such cats?

Sola and Salem.

"Do you know Sola?" Adderheart called, and Pantherleap looked to him, startled. "Or Salem?"

A loud crunching of snow sounded, and relief flooded him. *I was right.* Pantherleap looked back to him and appeared pleased but

confused. The tawny warrior took a few steps to the left, scenting the air once more as he lifted his muzzle into the air. Adderheart watched, a chill traveling down his spine.

"Tawn? Do you know Tawn?"

More crunching broke the still silence of the air and another burst of something similar to excitement sparking within him. Yet as soon as the crunching sounded, it seemed to go silent. The elders would only move minimally. They were being careful.

"Or anyone else from your rogue group?"

That time there was no crunching. Pantherleap delicately padded past the border and stuck his muzzle further out, sniffing the air, and he pointed his tail in the direction that he had been walking. A frown rippled across Adderheart's features. *I don't want to cross the border.*

Not crossing it had been ingrained in him for so long that he couldn't help but feel a strong wave of disagreement as the warrior crept a little farther. Waving his tail suddenly, Adderheart shook his skull rapidly, and Pantherleap peered over his shoulder to look to him.

"What?" Pantherleap hissed, attempting to keep his voice low.

"Get back here! We can't have you doing that!" Adderheart answered with his tail still swishing back and forth. Anxiety now climbed within him, using his fur as ladders so it could inch up and up.

"Why not?"

"...because!" His reply came from his maw swifter than he would've liked, but there was nothing he could do. "Please come back."

"Why don't you come to me?"

"No! No. I'm not doing that," he immediately answered, words tinted with a mild sharpness, and the tawny tom sighed softly. Making his way back to his mate, Pantherleap pressed against

Adderheart as he finally crossed back onto the correct side of the border.

Adderheart's gray eyes momentarily drifted to the sky, and he was startled to find that it was almost sundown. Shadows now were jumping and dancing around the area, darkly grinning at him. He looked around, dark eyes narrowing, and he took a few bounds away, looking back to his mate. Pantherleap tipped his skull.

"Where are we going?"

"Back. It's almost sundown."

"We haven't caught anything."

"There's probably something on the way."

And in fact, there was something on the way. It wasn't anything too big, of course, but somehow a robin had yet to leave. Both of the toms had been confused when first seeing it yet there was little they could do except attempt to scale the tree and scare it out and onto the ground, making it easier to get to and, overall, catch.

Such was eventually what happened, with Pantherleap awkwardly jumping up a few pine branches and managing to get the red-chested bird down at least a little further. Adderheart was watchful and so he was swift to spring upward, swiping at it, and his claws caught before he slammed it down and put the creature out of its misery.

The travel back was silent. It would've been awkward if the two were not mates. But it was a comfortable, pleasant silence, one that carried warmth through its winds and contentedness through its breezes. The crunching of the snow beneath them barely made a dent in terms to the pleasant silence, and neither did the scuffling of small pawsteps, buried deep in snow.

Yet, when they arrived at the meeting spot, the two other warriors were not yet around.

Adderheart sat down and wrapped his tail tightly around his paws. Silence settled back upon them once more as the snow beneath his

figure seemed to seep further and further into him, causing his figure to shiver after a few moments. Pantherleap appeared to have noticed this and so he settled down mildly close to him.

Now a little warmer, the tom pressed delicately against his mate's pelt. He didn't want to press too closely because if the two other warriors came back and spotted the two, it wouldn't end well, and so a small space was clearly present between—

"Adderheart?"

The tom sat up immediately, and Pantherleap swiftly sprung to his paws and took several steps toward the voice. Finchtansy stepped forward and her expression seemed clean enough. She didn't seem to be suspicious, but the rising anxiety within Adderheart was unstoppable.

"Yes?" Pantherleap answered for him, peering around the she-cat. "Is Poppyfur—"

His words swiftly cut off as the she-cat emerged and within her jaws, she clasped a mouse. Her expression was brightly decorated and she waved her tail excitedly.

"Hi!" She purred as best as she could, and Adderheart could sense the momentary shudder of the tom as she approached and accidentally brushed against him. Strolling right past, she claimed, "I think it's best if we go back now!"

Pantherleap seemed to go silent, so Adderheart rose and decisively nodded his skull. Poppyfur grinned and took off, followed by Finchtansy at only a minimally slower pace.

Adderheart pressed tightly against Pantherleap and the tom murmured something softly in response. He couldn't tell what it was, for the tawny warrior pressed his muzzle into his neck and Adderheart couldn't help but gently run his tail down the tom's spine.

"Are you okay?"

Pantherleap nodded mutely, pulling back with a harsh sniffle as he

lifted a paw and rubbed a little too excessively at his muzzle and soon after his gaze. Adderheart watched with a softened gaze.

"Don't hurt yourself," he murmured softly. Pantherleap didn't say anything, and he took a few steps forward, tail swishing as he scented the air. Appearing to have smelled the two other warriors, he headed off towards camp, and Adderheart swiftly followed.

The travel back was fine.

Pantherleap and Adderheart didn't find it necessary to catch up to the two warriors ahead, and so they simply padded side-by-side. The latter's tail swished delicately around the former's and Pantherleap leaned gently into his pelt.

Above them, the sky quietly churned in acceptance to their movements, accidentally creating clouds to cover the sunset that was beginning to form within the sky. Above them, the warmth of sundown tried to peek through to show the two wonderful colors blossoming within the sky. Above them, the clouds and the sky fought to see who would show them their own display of warmth and acceptance.

Below, the snow moved delicately to ensure their pawsteps were even, showing its approval of their more-than-friendship. Below them, the rocks and the dirt underneath the snow tried their best to shove through to show their recognition of their actions; yet for that to happen, they had to shove past the snow, and so that could barely happen with the clouds and the sky fighting.

At their sides, the trees waved back and forth as though allowing the two extra room for whatever they wished to do. At their sides, winds and chilly breezes created a small safe space, unwilling to touch the two cats, seemingly inching closer and closer together as if they were forgetting where they were. As if the whole world was fading away and the only thing that mattered was that they were together.

And in front of them, the camp entrance suddenly seemed to loom overhead, and instantly the two separated.

Adderheart slipped into the camp, swift to dart for the fresh-kill pile and drop it off before returning to Pantherleap's side. The tom seemed tired, eyes dulled as they swept the clearing. Finchtansy and Poppyfur were nowhere to be seen, and as much as Adderheart wanted to go straight to the warrior's den, a sharp tone split the clearing.

Instantly, Cougarstar was racing to the two with his lips drawn back.

"Get into my den," he ordered, and in a much more venomous tone, he snapped, "*now*."

Pantherleap straightened up and instantly padded to his den, whereas Adderheart stiffly followed, anxiety quickly rising as it clamped around his throat. *Does he know we went hunting? I can take the blame. It was my idea, right? It was now. Is it now? I don't know. What if he hurts Pantherleap? Did someone see us?*

Familiar pangs of panic rising quicker and quicker as he padded closer and closer to the leader's den, he paused to inhale shortly before slipping in.

He didn't like it. The den smelled strange, and Tinydust almost seemed to be brooding in the corner, her tail swept around her figure as she watched the two enter the den. That was it. *It's just us four? What are they going to do?* He wondered nervously, tail swishing anxiously behind him. His throat tightened and he sat down near to the exit, Pantherleap seating himself near to the tom.

"So," Cougarstar spat, "mind explaining why you smell like blood and those faulty elders?"

What? No, we didn't see them, only smelled them— it wasn't us! We didn't—

"So?" Cougarstar prompted once more, lifting a paw and jabbing it at his brother. "What do you have to say? Did you find them?"

"Yes," lied Pantherleap, "we did."

"Did you kill them, then?" He snapped.

"No," Pantherleap answered, "we didn't."

"Why not?" The leader hissed, "don't you know what they did to our Clan?"

No. I don't know what they did, I think that's your issue... We didn't— we didn't do anything—

Pantherleap appeared to gain some form of footing. "We didn't kill them, but— we did get a few scratches in," he explained, "they got away."

"Really? How? What did you do to them?"

"Scratched— scratched them," Pantherleap answered, voice momentarily shifting out of its usual pristine steadiness. "They got away, back to their camp. We think they were in our territory, and maybe they—"

That's not— no, don't, don't—!

"They got *away*?" The leader hissed, lifting a paw to slam it back down. "Why did you let that happen?"

We already— already said they got away. Why isn't he listening—?

"It wasn't our fault," Pantherleap replied, "there was another patrol. They saved—"

There wasn't—! There wasn't—! It wasn't us, it's not our fault—

"Another patrol? Tell me the whole story, not in these dumb parts!" The leader spat, turning to Adderheart with a fire blazing within his green-tinted eyes. "Tell me what happened. And don't split it up weirdly like *he's* doing," Cougarstar ordered, spitting out 'he' like it was a curse.

At first, he was silent. What could he say? Everything that his mate had said was a complete and total lie, and there was no way he could easily go back on any of it. Now that the tom had created a story for it, he had to go along with it. But how could he make sure that the information lined up? *I can't. I can't do this, I can't—*

Panic surged within him, clamping harshly down on his maw and his reasoned thoughts. Everything seemed to shatter around him. Sounds and words cut out. His vision blurred instantly, yet he couldn't tell if there were any tears. And yet, he could see Pantherleap lower his skull. *No, no— don't! Don't put— your head down, you're— you're so much better than—!*

"I d-don't know, th-there was a big, scary— scary thing, an-and the el-elders were trying to r-run away... so we tried to— tried to get them away but then we had to— to hurt— hurt them, so then... then... then they ran away from us an-and then they screamed-d, and then-n nobody— nobody knew what was h-happening because I t-told them that Willowdapple's new l-litter is named after th-them —"

And then it was all over.

Cougarstar immediately sprung to his paws, spitting out words traced with venom. But did he hear them? No. Words went over his skull but he did feel, watch, notice... everything, as the tom lifted a paw and scored his claws down his face.

Yelping like a little kit just out of the nursery, Adderheart stumbled up and backward as a paw rose to his face.

"*...did you say?!*" Cougarstar's furious words were spat out like a curse, his paw lifting once more, and the blood that edged the outermost parts of his paw almost made him want to vomit.

"He didn't mean it!" Pantherleap rose instantly, and the tom insisted, "Willowdapple would never do that!"

"Stagkit and Featherkit is... is..." the leader stopped, lips drew back, eyes blazing furiously as Adderheart shifted further back. Cougarstar hissed, "*Vixenfeather!* Bring me her *immediately*!"

"She didn't— it's n-not—" Adderheart blubbered, attempting to get some form of words out. She couldn't be punished. *She'll know it was — was me. It's not— my fault! I didn't— didn't mean to do—*

"Stop stuttering!" The leader spat, "no wonder nobody likes you, you

can't even talk correctly!"

Pantherleap whipped and snarled furiously at his brother, who leaned back with a surprised expression.

"You snarl at *me?*" Cougarstar asked, lifting a bloodied paw to his chest with his eyes widening in mocking fear. "I can *kill you* like how Pheasantstar did to your siblings," he spat, stalking forward as he lifted a paw and poised it above his brother's skull.

"D-don't! Don't! It was m-my fault, I suggested it—!" Adderheart huffed out, lifting a paw as he rubbed at his cheek, only to find that he smeared the blood further. His ears rang loudly, as though a half-silent protest to get away.

"You're talking like you know what you mean!" Pantherleap hissed, narrowing his gaze, "*our* siblings!"

Adderheart didn't even seem to register the conversation going on. It was all too much. He hadn't meant to say that. *I wasn't supposed— supposed to tell— or say anything— she will hate me—! She will make — make this Clan hate me—!*

Everything spiraled from control.

"I hated them the second they were born. They were less superior than me in every way; all runts. I don't know why you and *she* survived—"

"Stop! Stop!" Pantherleap shouted, snapping at the tom with his jaws.

"Stop— fighting!" Adderheart protested, unsteadily rising as he shook his head harshly back and forth, eyes wide with tears bubbling at the edges. "Don't hurt h-him—!"

"You know she's alive. They were talking about her!" Cougarstar snapped, voice a simple spray of venom as he snarled in a finalizing way. "Now shut up!"

"Never—! I won't let— let them go!"

"Stop f-fighting, s-stop—!"

Cougarstar turned to Adderheart, simply snapped his jaws, and then whipped back to his brother before bringing his hefty paw down upon the tawny tom's skull.

Rage and horror erupted within Adderheart, and before he could really even recognize what was occurring, he was launching toward the tom, and his own paw had slapped the leader's out of the way.

"Get *aw-away*, I s-said!"

Pantherleap cowered below, his ears pinned to his skull, and the fear in his eyes was enough to make Adderheart want to cry. *But now— now I have to be the strong one. For all— all the times I wasn't. I can— I can do this. I'm capable—* His thoughts were lies but lies that were enough twisted by some form of confidence that he was able to turn and face Cougarstar.

"Don't you ever get in my way again," Cougarstar warned, voice low as he looked down at his bloodied paw. He lifted it and sliced it across Adderheart's cheek, who flinched and shut his eyes, a shudder trailing his spine. "Both of your punishments, alongside Willowdapple's, will be decided tomorrow."

Tomorrow. One day. That's— that's it. We're done. I'm— gone. Everything, everything I— it's—

Cougarstar's eyes burned with a furious hatred as he towered over Adderheart. His final words allowed a true, burning fear to enter the tom's system. A genuine, ultimate and controlling phobia.

"Sleep in the elder's den. *Both of you.*"

chapter forty three

The elder's den was cold.

It did not hold the usual warmth of the warrior's den, and so Pantherleap and Adderheart found no harm in shifting closer to each other as the moments passed. It was near impossible to sleep with the chilly winds of leaf-bare biting all around the den, words icy and sharp as the two warriors tried to fall into a half-slumber.

The lack of warmth wasn't helping much either. The sun was yet to emerge from its place in the night, and so the moon took control, growling and hissing at the light it shed. It wished not to show itself, allowing the mild snowfall to occur further and conceal the world in a blanket of snow. Adderheart shifted closer to his mate, closing his eyes. It didn't matter if they were close. Everything would be over in a few hours.

Such didn't work. The crunching of snow outside of the den alerted Pantherleap and the tom sat up, rubbing his eyes. Adderheart tipped his skull and gently nudged the warrior.

"Did y-you sleep?" His words were nothing more than a whisper, easily lost to the cold wind swirling within the den.

Pantherleap shook his skull in a 'yes', and the tom looked to him with clear surprise.

"You did?" Pantherleap nodded another yes. "I didn't... not that-t much, anyways... it's too cold."

Pantherleap let a small "Yeah" escape his maw, scared and quiet, and the tawny warrior pressed closer against Adderheart. Leaning into his figure, Adderheart wrapped his tail around his mate's figure. *Are you okay?* He wanted to ask. Yet it felt as though his throat was a river and a sudden drought had occurred over the past few hours.

After being shouted at, the two had swiftly grabbed one of their catches from the pile, shared it, and then left to be alone in the elder's den. The camp had a crowd gathered within it, and that had made Adderheart even more upset. *They all knew. And they were all watching and listening and trying to get in on it.*

There was little that could be done. It was simply just a quiet den with a quiet camp and a quiet territory sounding it, save for the odd crunching of snow every few moments. It smelled an awful lot like blood because of the prey they had shared, but that didn't matter. As long as he was beside Pantherleap, then it would be okay.

It had to be okay in the end, anyways. They would run away if Cougarstar tried to hurt them. Adderheart would defend his mate if Cougarstar tried to punish him. He'd call on Finchtansy, Willowdapple, anyone who may help, anyone who could help. If there was a cat who'd help him, it would probably be Finchtansy.

So he simply laid his skull on his paws, letting his dark eyes close as he listened to his mate breathe quietly. As he listened to the snow plop gently down upon the slim layer, as he listened to the crunching grow louder and louder from an unknown source he was too tired and too upset to look at. He felt less and less upset as the moments went on and a feeling of total dread seemed to creep upon him, yet he tried his best to ignore it.

Scuffles outside of the den continued to sound and his ears pinned easily as he buried his skull in his paws, trying to ignore it. How come the snow couldn't just stop? *We're all trying to sleep. Just stop.* His tail swished back and forth with a harshness not seen, eyes squeezed shut.

And yet, the scuffles continued to grow louder and louder, and he almost thought he could hear a hiss or a growl buried down within other noises. Letting his head drift closer to the ground beneath, he wished for it to be quiet so he could sleep. And eventually, he slipped into a fitful slumber.

Yet, he couldn't detect as cats slipped around the camp. He couldn't detect as a warrior from within the warriors' den seemed to be awake for the same reason as him and his mate. He couldn't detect

as that white-and-ginger she-cat rose from her position within the den and slipped out.

But he could detect the shrill shriek that echoed across the camp.

Immediately sitting up, he blinked sleep from his gaze as he sprung, somewhat slowly, to his paws. Looking to Pantherleap, he found that the tom was already exiting, his tail swishing behind him. He opened his maw to speak but only could push himself out of the den after the tawny warrior.

There was a flood of cats and all of them were surrounding Finchtansy.

Sola. He recognized the she-cat, and her brother was stood beside her. Panic easily overtook him and he stumbled back, yet now more and more cats were exiting their den. The warriors' den was slowly emptying, and from this, many cats came from the den; Poppyfur, Birdwish, Marigoldcry, Russetpelt, Streamfang, Swallowripple, Fluffyflame... many more.

Beetlepath and Mudstripe hurried out. Briargaze sprinted out and Runningfoot followed, Galewind and Dustshade easily swerving around the crowd as Antwhisper trailed the crowd. Shrewclaw pushed his way through, and Fernfall and Freckletuft lazily exited.

Count. Count. How many warriors do we have? Are we going to lose? What if we all die? Then SageClan will fall, right, and then—? Thoughts easily raced before Marigoldcry stepped forward.

"Stop," she ordered, tail swishing furiously. "Get away from her." She lifted her tail and pointed at the warriors of SageClan, who easily shifted into formation around the rogues. Adderheart stood, frozen, at the entrance to the elder's den.

"No." A tone that seemed awfully strong and awfully confident rose from the crowd. It belonged to a tawny she-cat, her dark golden eyes carrying similar fires to those of Cougarstar's.

"Who are you?" Marigoldcry sneered, attempting to push through the row of rogues.

Though, it failed instantly, as cats turned and clawed at her, and then it was all over.

Cats launched themselves into battles, roaring furiously as their claws ripped across others' pelts. Jaws snapped and before Adderheart could move, a leopard-spotted she-cat was springing onto him, tearing her claws across his muzzle. *Nova*— He screamed unintelligibly, thrashing in her grip, unable to fight the panic that bit him harshly like the rogue above.

Using his back paws to push upward on the she-cat, he snapped his jaws weakly at her and hissed a threat that barely exited his maw. He grasped her ear with his teeth and pulled, and she screeched, using her claws to shred his flank before he kicked her off. Rising to his paws, he huffed and panted, trying to gain some form of foothold on his thoughts.

Dodging another attack, the warrior plunged into the battle, weaving around fighting cats.

Yet as he did so, his gaze caught on Bearpatch seated near the leader's den. Eyes searching, he caught a glimpse of Cougarstar somewhere within the battle, claws flashing, teeth bared.

Hopping out of the way of an approaching rogue, tinted brown, Adderheart panted as he sidestepped another attack, trying to pay attention to what Cougarstar was doing. Making another loop around the battlefield, he disguised himself in nearby shadows and squinted.

The leader was matched with the tawny she-cat from earlier, and it was only then that the warrior noticed the similarities in their pelts. Their eyes burned with the same fire, though of different hues, that didn't matter.

"You must have a nice mate, don't you? You've never fought in one of these battles before," Cougarstar spat, raking his claws over her ears. "Don't you miss it here in SageClan?"

What? What?

"Nova is a *wonderful* mate, thank you!" She screamed in response, lunging for him with her claws outstretched, easily catching his neck in her grasp. Thrashing now, she threw him to the ground with unmatched strength. "You wouldn't know. *You* only have mates to have kits!"

"My mate is *wonderful*, thank you!" He mimicked, huffing as he pressed harshly upon her belly. "And my kit is too!"

"*Kit,*" the rogue flared, "you k—"

Adderheart didn't get to see whatever happened next, because a pale heather-toned she-cat launched onto him.

Immediately feeling a similar sense of panic to earlier's, he thrashed in her grip, trying to press upward as he bit in the air. *Scare her. Scare her.* If he scared her, maybe she would get off. Maybe she would stop. Blood pooled around her face, likely from battles already had, and so he managed to get one of his paws free and score his claws down her face.

The she-cat screeched, biting down on his ear, and a flaming feeling seemed to consume it. Yelping, he pressed upon her belly and sunk his claws into her shoulders, pressing her up to her paws and then back onto her back.

Everyone's screams and yells seemed to mix together to form one collective sound, one he despised and one that seemed to imprint in his skull forever. He pressed harshly down on her, trying to pin her, yet the rogue used her back legs to kick his out from under him, and he fell.

Adderheart sprung to his paws, leaping to the side as she aimed once more, and he bared his teeth before running off. Now he was aware of it all. Blood pumped through his ears and he could feel the substance trickling down his face, soaking his ears, and he hated it. He hated it and wished it could go away but there was little he could do.

Everyone was engaged in battle. Poppyfur was fighting a pale sandy yellow she-cat, and Birdwish struggled nearby with a small black-

and-white striped she-cat. Her brown eyes burned furiously, jaws snapping at the SageClan warrior.

A lithe sandy spotted she-cat ran from the edges of the battle, and Adderheart could see her original opponent.

Pantherleap.

Immediately, Adderheart sprung to try to go to the tom, yet he charged past. Despite all the cuts and bruises littering his pelt, despite all the pain he seemed to be experiencing — all of which made Adderheart want to vomit right there — Pantherleap sprinted forward.

And he bowled over the tawny she-cat from before. The one who had been talking to Cougarstar.

But he didn't hurt her.

Words drifted from his muzzle in a half-panicked and half-confused way. His claws were sheathed though it was clear that the tom was unwilling to let her free, keeping her pressed to the ground.

"You're— you're—!"

"Get off me!" She spat, thrashing harshly in his grasp. "I don't know who you are!"

"Yes, yes you do— I'm Pantherleap, you do—"

She stilled, eyes seeming to round upon his words. Her figure went slack, and she appeared to stop fighting against him. Pantherleap's eyes were edged with tears, ones that fell easily from his eyes.

"No, you're not. You're lying, you— you can't be," she nettled, once more thrashing within his grip as she finally seemed to shove him off.

"I am! I am—! Please, believe me, I know you left—" Pantherleap insisted, voice shaking as he leaped for her again, paws outstretched. She simply swatted a paw at him and he tumbled to the ground, dust clouding.

"Don't say it!" She squabbled, leaning over him. "Don't. Don't! I know he's leader, and you— you can't say that."

"But I know— I know! I know what it's like—"

The she-cat sunk her claws into his belly, and he screeched, thrashing as she slashed her claws against his sides a moment later. It was clear now that injuries from earlier in the battle were now reopened, blood easily flowing from all of the wounds. His entire pelt seemed to go ginger with all of the crimson liquid.

"Wh-why are you h-hurting m-me—?" He yelped, desperately trying to get away from her. "I'm y-your broth—!"

"Stop!" The rogue flared, leaning close down to his muzzle. "I'm not! I'm— I'm not."

"*Tawn*—!"

"That's— that's— don't call me that. Don't call me that, I don't know you and you d-don't know me either. I'm not Tawn, and you're not Pantherkit!" Frustrations rose all the more as the senior warrior continued.

"See! See!... you know. You know— leap. Pantherl-leap... C-come on, help me—! I was bl-blind before. I'm s-sorry, I didn't— Cougarstar, he was too— I didn't kn-know any better. But now I know. Now I like a—" Pantherleap's breathing hitched suddenly. "...a tom."

Several SageClan warriors turned and gave the senior warrior a blank stare, causing the rogues to easily overpower them and pin them. Before Adderheart could react, a tall white-and-black patched tom was pinning him to the ground, his amber-yellow eyes shiny and bright.

Adderheart felt like everything was constricting around him. Pantherleap was trapped underneath some random she-cat who he didn't know and was telling her that he knew her. *He can't tell her that. He shouldn't, why did—?*

Using his fading strength to push the cat atop him off, he searched

around for another opponent. Blood trickled past his skull and into his gaze and he lifted a paw to swipe it away. Revealing a good patch of the crimson upon his paw, he sidestepped and knocked against a she-cat.

Anything else that had been in his skull was fading as swiftly as his strength. Everything was overtaken by thoughts of the she-cat's identity, of the battle, of the blood that was now staining the camp's ground, of the whirring of screams and slicing of pelts around him.

Fight. Fight. This is your chance. Just do something. Don't just stand—!

He turned and quickly launched himself at the she-cat and found her to be Nova, the she-cat from one of the earlier battles. Energy surged through him as he pinned her to the ground, using his claws to rip chunks of her fur out.

Nova grunted furiously, using her back paws to shove the slimmer tom off. Her short coat was stained with blood, the liquid seeping as Adderheart easily dodged an incoming attack.

Sidestepping as he sliced his claws along her flank, the she-cat whipped and grasped his paw within her jaws. Yelping, he attempted to draw himself backward, but a forced hit him hard on his side and he had no choice but to feel the excruciating pain as he was ripped from his spot.

But he wasn't.

Nova's grip was tight and so he tumbled to the ground easily, though his paw seemed to crack and snap so that now it felt useless, broken, ultimately frozen in place as though he hadn't moved quick enough to prevent it. Yowls and screams seemed to die within his throat.

He shifted and thrashed his paw free, but it was almost like it wasn't there at all.

Turning, he noted that the cat on top of him was the she-cat that had been fighting and with a jolt, a new kind of terror shot through him. Her name popped within his skull. *Tawn.* She bared her jaws

as his mind began to race. *She knows. She knows. Doesn't she—?*

"Don't you hurt her ever again!" Tawn spat, snapping her teeth close to his muzzle.

"Why—? She's the one that hurt *me!*"

"Because she's my mate, you imbecile," she flared, "don't hurt her. I don't care if you don't believe in it or something, but I care for her. *Don't hurt her!*"

Easily, his mind tripped over her words. *She must've messed up.* She couldn't have meant that. Could she have? It wasn't true. There... no, that didn't—

"Are you listening?" Tawn hissed, using her paw to whack his skull, and the tom instantly snapped back and whimpered, shaking his skull harshly. "No?"

"I am—! I am. I'm s-sorry, I just meant that— no, I mean—" Words were too hard. Everything was coming out wrong. He didn't mean that. He wanted to tell her about Pantherleap. *Make the connection —*

Her dark golden eyes were twin pairs of a blazing fire. "What? What? That it's just what you know? To hate cats like Nova and me? Yeah, I'm sure it is, I'd know." As soon as she said this, she stopped.

Gaze rounding, she immediately sprung off him and mumbled something in a newly-distressed way and hurried off. Panic rose all the more. *What happened? What—*

Turning harshly, the tom struggled up to his paws. White-hot agony split through his paw and he stumbled backward, knocking against a cat behind him. He turned to apologize but a scream ripped through his figure.

It was Willowdapple, her body all ruined and all messed up with blood and tufts of fur missing from her pelt. Her eyes were wide and glazed with a never-ending terror and Adderheart toppled to the ground, blood now pumping furiously through him. She was

dead. Her kits. Where were they?

Her two kits faded from his skull as new problems rose. Blood seemed to haunt the clearing, hanging over them like a cloud that would never stop raining terror. It stunk of horrible things, and yowls and screams still surrounded the clearing like the cloud's older sibling who, too, would not leave.

Corpses now littered the clearing, and despite the fact it seemed as though SageClan was winning, there were definitely more Clanners bodies. A fluffy white pelt, now stained crimson, was settled near the edge, alongside a pelt that clearly used to be brown.

Yet as his gaze continued to swerve around, it caught upon a tawny pelt.

Terror grasped tightly at him as he stumbled forward. Everything fell as soon as he had managed to build it back. *No. No*— It couldn't be. Pantherleap had fought well, right? Right? But as he approached, fears dwindled before surging again.

Cougarstar.

Whipping to avoid the tom, he stumbled away, paw collapsing beneath him. It couldn't be. He couldn't. He who had made it so difficult to enter and leave camp, gone? It was impossible, it couldn't be. How had he died? In battle?

It had to be fake. It had to be. There was no way— no way that... that had occurred. Right? Had Tawn killed him? Maybe that was why she had gotten away. Maybe that was why the battle seemed to slow around him. Or maybe that was because cats were dying. And there were fewer of them.

Dragging himself away, he eventually had to conceal the feelings and emotions now rising. All of them felt too strong. Too heavy and too strong for the weak, bleeding tom. Adderheart couldn't believe or understand it. But his paw hurt. And his head hurt. And blood was everywhere.

Yet, as his eyes shifted, another tawny pelt caught his vision.

And that time, everything fell apart.

chapter forty four

All was empty. Everything was over. Nothing mattered.

Odors of the battle seemed to hover around the tom. Screeches lingered around the warrior. They avoided him like they knew what was happening. Like they understood what was going on.

All was empty.

The tawny figure did not move. It did not lift its skull to try and say something. It did not twitch its tail and its muzzle certainly did not open. It was a still stone; a stone dropped into water and buried deep within the river's rushing current, forgotten, disguised among other stones, all the same in the eyes of death.

He wanted to get up and race to the tom. But he couldn't. Because there was a battle. Because his paw still wouldn't do what it was meant to. Because now that tears were mixing with blood and all was growing faster and faster, as if it had been spun off-center, all spiraling out of control.

Struggling, he dragged himself over, allowing his paw to lag behind. It didn't matter if it hurt after the battle. Because after the battle, it would all be over anyway. It would all be empty.

Blood easily flitted around his figure, staining his originally creamy-brown fur a deep, saturated shade. He continued to attempt to surge forward, yet every attempt he made failed. Toppling to the ground, he struggled up as he tried to avoid getting in the way of all the cats fighting.

It took a long time to get over to his pelt. And by the time he got there, the warmth had drained and left only a vessel of who he loved. A trace of heat seemed present yet it was mostly cold, like a stone. A stone long forgotten, dropped in the river—

As he got over, he hoped and he prayed that it wasn't him. *Tawn*. It

could be her. Right? She had been fighting for a long time. And if it wasn't, maybe he was just sleeping. He got too tired so he stopped battling and decided to sleep.

Gently, he allowed his figure to rise as he hopped upon his front paw, trying to balance himself before he slumped to the ground, shutting his eyes tight. *If they're closed— then I never— never have to see.*

But just because his gaze was shut didn't mean he forgot about the cat in front of him. It took up every portion of his brain, full and cluttered and never to be empty; that was for afterward. Empty was for after the battle.

Eyes opening, he immediately slammed his skull against the ground, shutting them closed again. *I can't—*

The figure held a pair of two dark green eyes, two twin leaves that were shadowed and glazed over. Terror and fear were frozen within his eyes; ice, unable to be melted, never leaving their position.

The figure's pelt was stained with blood and beneath his skull, laid limply on the ground, lay a scratch that edged itself straight across his throat. That was what had caused the blood to surround him. That was what had caused the crimson liquid to seep into his pelt.

The figure's features were slumped, limp and powerless to anything that happened. Wind battered against their frames in unison, hurting them both equally despite one being gone, and the other still present.

Adderheart pressed his head into his paws, clamping his maw shut. If he didn't do anything, maybe he would come back. Maybe the warrior wouldn't be where he was. Maybe he would be okay.

Yet his eyes edged open again and there Pantherleap was, still as a stone, dropped in a river to be—

All was over. All was empty.

Tears flooded from Adderheart's gaze as he tried to get away, scrambling as his paw sharply protested beneath him. Its pain

couldn't compare to the one tearing through his figure, ripping up his head as though it was a cat with a pair of claws.

It was as though there was a sludge that surrounded him and froze him in place. Breathing in was like trying to sort through the thick substance and so he gasped and hiccuped for air through his tears, control quickly running from him. Adderheart slammed his head on the ground, squeezing his eyes shut, breathing ragged.

It was hard to breathe. Nothing was right. *Alone. Alone. Gone. He's gone. Gone. You're alone.* His brain focused on only a few words. But it didn't matter. They didn't matter. Nothing did. It was empty. All was over. Pantherleap was gone. Gone.

Alone.

Puffing for air now, he continued to hit his skull against the ground, not caring that everything was spinning. Why would he? Pantherleap was gone. Gone. And he would never come back. Dots danced at the edges of his vision; they were bright, compared to the darkness of his shut eyes.

Yet, he couldn't get things under control. Usually, with help from someone else, he could breathe normally once more and the dots would go away. His head would stop spinning and he could move normally.

Someone else. That someone else was gone. So not now. Not now that he was alone.

His head continued to whip in circles. The dots continued to grow and breathing seemed impossible. Now, he survived off simple gasps, his own eyes wide as the speckles turned dark. Pantherleap's body danced in the edges of his vision and he thumped his skull on the ground again.

And then a cat sprung to him and sunk their claws into his shoulder.

Spluttering as he struggled in their grip, he could barely feel or see as the cat slashed at his pelt. He didn't know who it was. But that

didn't matter. He knew what was going to happen as all spiraled away from him.

Still trying to breathe, he gasped and panted and huffed as he blinked rapidly, but the dots stayed, happily taking over his vision. A leopard-spotted pelt flashed and he nearly vomited, head shaking rapidly as he tried to get out of their grip.

The cat appeared to have noticed his paw and yanked harshly on it and a horrible, broken, crackly yowl came from his maw, and he continued to scream after. He didn't have to say anything. His chest hurt, blood was everywhere, he couldn't breathe, tears were flowing too quickly—

Alone.

All over again did he scream and cry and slam his head to the ground and try to breathe through his quickly fading focus, but this time he noticed that the cat wasn't hurting him. The cat was gone. His pelt was littered with injuries. But none of them were fresh; none of them had happened within the past few moments.

Alone.

As time continued to tick by, he heard a voice that seemed to break through the wall he'd built up.

"...are you *crying*?"

It didn't come through as a full sentence but that didn't matter. Adderheart knew who it was now. But he couldn't say anything. His throat felt as though it was closed around a rock within itself, and he clenched his paws before pain flared within the right one.

"...hear me?"

He lifted his head, looking to Nova, and the she-cat was also littered with injuries. Her eyes were sharp with confusion and yet they, too, were rimmed with mild redness. Adderheart's lip easily trembled and she sighed, looking at him, appearing to have made the connection.

"...wasn't...so?"

Adderheart didn't know if he could say anything. He didn't know if he wanted to. And if he did, would she hurt him? All felt further away and all was slowly growing cold around him, as though everything was fading.

"Hello?"

That time it came through full and powerful, and she took a step toward him. Immediately shifting backward, his eyes flashed with worry but she didn't seem to notice. He struggled but managed to open his maw and get a few words out.

"M-my m-mate— is g-gone—" Saying it made his throat constrict for half a moment more. Hot tears burned at the edges of his gray eyes.

"Gone?" She stared at him. "This is your fault for being in this Clan," she commented, venom woven in all of her undertones. "If you wouldn't have been so bad then maybe she'd be alive."

"N-no—!" Panic rose easily. It wasn't a she-cat, it was a tom, and he tried to convey this by pointing harshly at the figure of his mate. "That's— th-that's h-him—"

Nova's eyes widened and Adderheart couldn't help but feel dizzier. "Your mate's a tom? I thought they didn't allow that...? That's the entire reason why Tawn l—" She stopped immediately and stepped backward but he lurched awkwardly forward, shaking his skull.

"No— nobody kn-knew... Cougars-s-st-star would've— w-would've k-killed us. Not s-safe... not s-safe."

"Tawn is Cougarstar's brother, you know that, right? They have a third brother, Pantherleap—"

"Th-that's h-him—! Pantherleap w-w-was my m-mate. We ha-had to h-h-hide and... and— n-now he's g-gone and I-I—" He cut her off accidentally, immediately beginning to try to speak again before he grew very dizzy and weak once more, figure swaying as his vision blurred.

"...really? Tawn's my mate... two of the..." Now her words were fading in and out. Her pelt seemed easily to blend with the bloody ground behind it. No. The ground was pale white. Was it?

"H-help—" he whispered, words taken easily by the cries of mourning cats nearby. The battle's sounds appeared to have faded away; yet, was it due to the tom's fading vision and focus or the battle's end, he did not know.

The leopard-spotted pelt lurched forward and he could feel a figure beneath him, with a pelt as soft as a blanket and a figure slim as his. But it was all fading away, the dots easily taking over his view.

As he seemed to be lifted from the ground below, he could feel the slight stickiness of blood flutter beneath him as he was moved. His sight had faded and left simple splashes of light and dark, a mixture of both plastering itself across his view.

He could almost tell that something else was going on. Air and something else moved around him; a pelt? It felt soft. But said feeling seemed also to be dissipating. Was it even there? Mind slowing, his figure went slack.

And yet, he seemed immediately to jerk back to the waking world as movements sped up, air rushed around him. All was a hurricane and it was all moving too swiftly around him; whatever had been beneath him disappeared, now replaced with a hard, painful object.

Then he slammed upon the ground and everything vanished.

—

Theoretically, he wouldn't have wanted to wake up.

In a world in which his mate was not around, Adderheart preferred to be in a place where his mate was. And if that was not in the waking world, that was okay with him. It would've been better to be with him than without.

Within the conscious realm, everything that the two shared had to be hidden. None of it was allowed to be shown at all. Punishments were dealt for not abiding by rules that had been ingrained into the

walls, into the floor, onto the sky; scrawled upon trees and scribbled into leaves. Everyone knew them. And in turn, nobody broke the rules. Except a few.

Being part of a pair that had broken said rules, the tom didn't want to live within a world without Pantherleap. It was too lonely. Too many problems could come from what had happened. And Cougarstar's promise for suffering still lingered within his senses.

Senses.

As soon as such a thought seemed to enter his skull — a thought. Within his skull. His skull?

Feeling seemed to rush back and instantly he was aware of everything around him. There was moss beneath him. Moss within a shape similar to a nest's. A moss nest— he was laying on a moss nest. The air around him was crisp and cold. It moved slowly around his figure, lifting only a few bloodied tufts from his pelt every few moments.

Blood.

Only then was he aware of the next scent within the air; blood. And on his pelt, the same crimson substance crusted over portions of his fur. As feeling slowly flooded back to his figure, he was suddenly aware of the total and complete white-hot pain that sloshed onto him.

Immediately withering backward into the nest and wanting to disappear right then and right there, the tom's maw stretched as if to ask for help from anyone around. It was all too much; the thoughts seemed to dim as pain overtook him easily, clamping down on his frame as easily as he'd realized it was there.

He wanted to curl up into a ball and scream for hours and hours, each time only repeating that it hurt, it hurt. Someone had to help him. It hurt. Why hadn't anyone helped him? *It hurts. Hurts.* His breathing easily became choppy and his maw slammed down to clamp tighter, squeezing his eyes shut.

But before he had done so, he'd caught half a glimpse of his injuries.

His legs were all torn up, with seemingly millions of gashes and cuts littering their surfaces, but nothing could compare to his paw. The front right one seemed to simply be a mess of cobwebs and tufts of fur, and it hurt the most. Everything right around it hurt the most.

Compressing his gaze so tightly that flashing white dots seemed to pattern themselves across it, a breathy exhale escaped his lips as he gritted his teeth. *If I stay, then they will heal me.* But it was unsafe. Wasn't it?

As he exhaled, blood seemed to bubble in his throat and he coughed violently, soon turning to vomit as he leaned and was sick. A strong sense of shame surged up and his ears pinned as he spat onto the ground once more, trying to move away, but finding that such was impossible.

From all the sudden movement, pain seemed to suddenly grasp on him and he gritted his teeth harsher before he struggled up. His head spun in response but he couldn't stop now. It was unsafe. And with Pantherleap somewhere around here, he had to find him, right?

Alone.

Struggling not to throw up again, he seemed to sway and immediately went crashing against the wall — of the den, now that he knew as the medicine cat's den — at this new thought that seemed to remind him of all that had happened. Bile threatened to spill from his maw and he coughed once, blood spilling up and tinting the ground below him blood.

But it was already tinted the same crimson shade. He lifted his head with great difficulty to attempt to observe the area around and saw his back, all slashed and covered in cobwebs and poultices. Struggling still, the tom pulled himself before looking down at his paw.

Jerking his head to avoid looking at it, he set his jaw and squeezed

his eyes shut. Again he seemed to realize the total and awful ending of the battle; Pantherleap was gone and his figure and his pelt and everything was ruined. Cougarstar would punish him and Willowdapple and it would all be over. Bile pressed at his maw but he simply spat it to the side, hacking soon after.

Eventually, he stood in front of the herb wall, head spinning.

He could hear some form of faint breathing nearby. It was a wheeze more so but it, too, was fading, and so he peered to the herbs, huffing. He had to take something, didn't he? He couldn't be punished or face Cougarstar like this.

As soon as he lifted his front paw, he couldn't help but immediately plummet to the ground. His balance easily escaped him and so he looked up from the ground, squinting as though to ensure he could see what he was looking at. *I have to take something. Something. This hurts—*

But what if he picked something wrong? Or something that would hurt him? He knew not to pick berries. They would hurt if they were deathberries. But there had to be other poisonous herbs, right?

It didn't matter.

If he picked something that would kill him, who would care?

Willowdapple popped into his skull as he lifted his paw to pick something from the herbs. Yet, the thing that followed caused him to crash forward, quickly sending herbs scattering all over the space nearby him.

She's gone—

Her limp figure popped into his head and then so did a second tawny pelt. The pelt, atop such a sculpted and such a powerful figure, now unmoving and still. It had seemed to have been there for a while. At least a bit.

Cougarstar.

He grabbed the first three herbs in front of him — the first was a

small, green plant with seemingly millions of small white clusters of flowers, whereas the second was a bunch of tiny red berries, and the third was just a strange fluffy plant — and shoved them in his mouth.

Yet immediately he seemed to regret it, realizing that he had eaten red berries, and he instantly slammed his skull onto the ground nearby. Stumbling up to his paws and shoving his way out of the den, the warrior looked around at the bloody camp and wanted to —

Quickly he made his way to the entrance and pushed his way through. It wasn't safe. He couldn't die in camp. He couldn't. He couldn't do anything. His heart seemed to instantly speed up as panic easily took over and he pushed further and further.

Go. Go—

If he kept moving, it would be fine. If he kept going, it would be okay. If he kept walking, it would be alright. But walking grew more and more difficult. His paws turned to liquid. His legs dissipated. His head was a rock and it was thrown easily around.

Easily, he slumped to the ground after what seemed to be a moon of walking. He huffed quietly, panting as he slouched further, eyes seemingly glazing as he laid his head down. Everything was too much, moving too swift, moving... moving? Maybe if the herbs did kill him, it wouldn't be that bad after all.

And then the world blinked away. Again.

chapter forty five

It was not gone for long, though.

When everything flashed back around him, he was not within the territory. The air was strangely crisp and clean. There were pelts and cats around him, moving swiftly and causing air to easily skimp by him. He was floating; a cloud within a sky of multi-colored pelts that moved incessantly.

And then the voices came through.

It was like they were discussing what was going to happen. Some sounded deep, gruff, upset. Others were more just confused, whereas a few were high-pitched, screaming, afraid of what was going to happen next. Those hurt his ears the most.

After the voices, the feelings and touches filtered through, yet, in a heavier fashion than last time.

No longer was it a gentle motion of whirring pelts. Now he was aware of the cats pressed aside him. And he was able to feel the fact that there were new things on his pelt. Not the herbs from before. It felt almost like leaves or moss. And the same feeling was upon his paw.

Then the voices flooded through, louder, more confused, more concerned.

"This is Adderheart!" Slow concern washed onto him.

"How do you know that?"

"We spoke at the battle! Pantherleap's dead and he was—"

The cat who had answered went silent, and a hurried motion flurried around him, followed by several hushed apologies and a loss of warmth at his side. Now that caused him to jolt upward. Dark gray eyes flitting open, he could only squint at the world

around him.

Everything that wasn't in his immediate vision was mildly blurred, but the two cats ahead of him were in a crisp, clear view. They were easy to see and their pelts seemed to burn into his mind, the image imprinted into his skull.

It was Nova and Tawn, the former wrapped comfortingly around the latter. Her leopard-spotted pelt was cleaned to perfection yet it had dark bloody stains upon it, scratches and gashes littering her legs and flanks. Tawn was similarly injured, cobwebs and moss wrapped around her neck.

There were other cats, too, but they were either leaving or digging into the ground. Brief confusion seemed to enter his figure before it faded and he realized that they were digging up prey. It seemed old. Had they kept it there for all that time?

They were all rogues, though. And that was clear. Yet, the tom had no explanation for how he'd gotten here. He didn't even know where he was; he could've been in the territory earlier, but if he had been, how had they found him? Had they invaded again?

As soon as Nova noticed that he'd woken up, she murmured something in Tawn's ear before slipping away and settling down in front of him.

"Are you okay?" The question was soft and gentle from her maw.

He shook his head. What else could he do? He was in their care, it seemed.

"My mate and I wanted to help you. We know what happened with Pantherleap, and we're sorry."

It seemed as though the warrior had forgotten that they were mates, and the entire battle popped right back into his head. He jolted forward, as though he was trying to reach for Tawn, and Nova shook her head in response. The leopard-spotted she-cat frowned and pity shone brightly in her eyes.

"It's not her fault," Nova told him quietly. "She didn't know that he

was right there. She's not a malicious cat."

But she had killed Pantherleap, technically. *Right?* Hadn't she? She'd been the one to hurt him the most. Right? And so it was Tawn's fault. The rogues. It was the rogues' fault that his mate had— that his mate was gone. *Cougarstar was right?*

"Cougarstar is, and that's why he did what he did. I would've stopped him, but it was too late."

Nova seemed to notice the confusion rising within his gaze and mercy seemed to shine even brighter in her eyes. The rogue glanced back to look at Tawn, who was staring off into the distance, quiet.

"Tawn?"

The leader turned, eyes red-rimmed as she tipped her head slowly. "What?" Her voice was a piece of glass; easily shattered yet hard to be conjured in the first place.

"He doesn't know about Cougarstar... and the kits, too."

Kits? What kits? Willowdapple's corpse popped into his skull and his dark gray eyes could only widen silently, panic briefly rising. Through the numbness of it all, had Willowdapple really caused that? Guilt followed and he lowered his head, lip quivering.

Nova used her paw to lightly lift his skull, and he shook his head harshly as he inched back.

"Careful!" She warned as she pointed to his paw. It was now covered in moss and cobwebs, a few herbs squeezed in here and there. He scowled at it, frustration rising. He was useless. He only dragged those around him down, and when he tried his best, all he did was fall back.

"Sorry," she stated, skull dipping down as though to apologize.

"Then tell him," Tawn interrupted, sitting down behind Nova with her long tail wrapping around her darker paws. Her dark golden eyes were sharp yet softened by hardship and sadness.

"After Tawn was fighting Pantherleap, she realized that he wasn't joking or anything about liking a tom... and Cougarstar had heard, so he demanded to know if it was true."

"And my brother would never lie. So he didn't." Tawn's voice was quiet once more, and she studied the ground beneath her. Confusion sparked in him but there was little to say, pain easily taking over any emotion he could've felt within a moment's notice.

"So then— Cougarstar killed him, and then he was going to try to find you. Tawn and Cleo, Aurelian, and Nimbus all tackled him, and then it was all over for him too... Aurelian, Cleo, and Nimbus are some of our most skilled cats. Nimbus is my brother, and Tawn is Pantherleap and Cougarstar's sister."

"I wanted to save you," Tawn stated faintly. "It's not my place, but I just... I don't know. We're related." Tawn seemed to realize something else along with this fact, and she lifted a paw to her skull with her eyes darting below. "Your kits, they're... I'm sorry, they're gone."

"N-not mine—" he somehow managed, and both she-cats were surprised when his voice came out half-strong, a note of fire buried deep as he looked at his paws. Shame filled him. He couldn't take credit to Featherkit and Stagkit when they weren't his. He didn't want them.

"Willowdapple was—?"

"It must've been fake," Tawn interrupted her mate, sending a partially apologetic look to her. Adderheart nodded in confirmation. "You *were* Pantherleap's mate, right?" He nodded again, a familiar feeling surging. "So it was a ploy to get Cougarstar off your track?"

"Didn't you try to do that before you left?" Nova asked Tawn, who whipped around and glared. "Sorry, I thought—"

"It's fine. Just don't. Don't."

Silence settled upon the she-cats, and he didn't like them. Not anymore. He didn't feel safe with the she-cats even if they had

wanted to save him. What were they going to do now? Would they leave him in the territory? *What did they do to me when I was out?*

He knew his pelt was covered in moss and some herbs but it still felt wrong. The tom hadn't done anything to assist them. Was it repaying him for his loss? What would happen next? Take him back to the rogues? *But what if I don't want to go there? They'll know I'm a warrior because of my name. They'll—*

"Do you want to go back to SageClan?" Tawn questioned, her skull tipping. "If you do, I understand... but know that Bearpatch will be the new leader, and Tinydust will likely be killed if she is not already dead."

Adderheart couldn't handle this and he turned and vomited onto the ground, and before he jerked his head away he saw little specks of leaves and berries within the mixture. The bile rose again and he was sick once more, spitting up as his head spun.

Nova had sprung up and away, whereas Tawn had lifted herself and grabbed nearby moss to place it atop the substance after he was done. Everything hurt again. His throat felt like it was going to burn into nothingness and his brain was a rock, slamming into the insides of his head.

"...have to bring him back," Nova said, her voice cutting through his fading focus.

"What if Bearstar... and attacks?" Tawn interrupted, and the tom could feel paws and pelts beneath him again. His skull lolled back and knocked upon the tree behind him, and he could only thrash as pain once more surged within his brain.

Why was everything so difficult? He failed to understand why bad things continually happened. And why he was the recipient of it all? It was horrible but there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Then everything fizzled away again as darkness easily took over his vision.

Yet it didn't stay for long. Every now and then, feeling or hearing

would burst back into his faded world, attempting to get him to stay awake. A poke from his side, a sharp voice that seemed to flit in and out; all of it was too hard.

Adderheart couldn't seem to grasp onto anything that would keep him awake. Everything was fleeting; feeling, emotion, even pain. But the darkness stayed, covering his vision even when he wanted to see things around him.

And yet, he could somehow tell they were moving. The two she-cats trudged along with other cats half-surrounding them, chatters and whispers shared between them. Now that Adderheart couldn't hear them, they could say whatever they wanted.

They weren't being rude or mean. Simply, they were being truthful in that if they were to really bring him back to the rogues, he would essentially never go back to SageClan. And was it really their place to take him away from there?

But the counters were that it wasn't safe, it wasn't good for him to be in that environment. Not after Pantherleap, not after Cougarstar, and anything else that had happened. It was probably upsetting for the tom, and their assumptions were correct. But he couldn't comment. He didn't know they were talking.

The rogues kept walking, and Adderheart continued to struggle on getting a grip on the world. Feelings seemed to grow more prominent as moments passed, pain soon following. And then, a strong sense of confusion.

Why did he keep trying? Everything was a cycle; a cycle that was harsh yet full of truths that were hard to understand. And as the cycle continued to spin, he found that everything that he was dealing with was a truth he didn't like. While that was normal, after these truths came more difficulties. More problems rose from said difficulties.

No matter how hard he tried to understand the cycle, it continued to whirl and spin without thinking about him. And no matter how hard he tried to make things better through it all, things always fell through. The greatest thing that had ever happened to him —

Pantherleap — even was gone. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Control was something he lacked but craved. He never had been a leader. Or a deputy. Or an heir. Or a healer. Or even the healer's apprentice. Only a warrior, one who had been respected before he'd started messing up. And that was due to Pantherleap, wasn't it? *But Pantherleap was good in general. It wasn't his fault I started— started...*

Feelings and thoughts quickly shattered as easily as they had come, and once more was he left with emptiness. Everpresent and never-leaving, it seemed, clinging to him like how moths would cling to spots of light within the sky, or how water would cling to a cat's pelt when they had recently left a pool of the liquid.

He was a stone, a rock, a boulder. One that cracked easily whenever something attacked it, and one that could easily crumble too. But one that was, most of all, heavy and hard to carry. His words were a burden to any that had to hear, and his figure was one laden with many issues and problems that not even he could carry it.

Especially with his paw, now, which seemed to pop into his mind as though to remind him if he had forgotten about it. Pain suddenly seized his figure and he thrashed momentarily in wherever he was, not understanding that he was no longer in the grasp of the rogues. His eyes flew open and somehow, he was in a camp.

He was toward the edge or the wall, and everything around him spun as soon as he allowed his eyes to peek open. Cats flitted around, all of different shapes and sizes, holding different pelts and different sharpened gazes. Though none seemed to be on him.

The tom tried to move but it was impossible. Everything around him was simply a weight, all pressing down harshly at the exact same time. He could feel some sort of rock behind him, and as he twisted awkwardly and with great difficulty, he seemed to see what the camp really was.

There were two large trees that towered above the camp, sheltered within a small dip within the ground. That was notable by the taller ground that seemed to rise around his vision. There were leaves on

the trees— no, there weren't, there were no leaves. That was only the colors in the sky flashing too quickly to be differenced from leaves. And besides, it looked like it had snowed, with white patches on the ground flitting around within his sight.

Yet, the trees still rose tall and strong, with many branches that seemed to multiply instantly as he surveyed them. They both had thick branches with tons of tiny twigs, hanging over the camp as though a protective force over it.

Around the dip, there was a decent collection of moss and brambles combined. There seemed to be a few dens dug into the ground, though as his eyes traveled back around the camp once more, they seemed less like dens and more like just some half-created nests tossed together to ensure that nobody froze.

Though, the more he looked, the harder it became to distinguish anything from anything else. The nests blurred with the ground and it sometimes seemed like the nests had snow in them, yet at other times it seemed as though the ground was swallowing the nests straight up.

He closed his eyes for a moment but found that such a motion only caused him more and more pain, and suddenly Pantherleap popped into his skull.

It was a new, different layer of pain. One layer turned into three, and next, it multiplied by twenty, easily turning into numbers he couldn't count, numbers he didn't know. Pantherleap was gone. And he was alone. Fresh tears blurred the edges of his eyes and he couldn't have felt guiltier.

His mate was gone and he hadn't even done anything to help. And, more so, he had forgotten, and continued to do so— it was as though the thought itself brought him so much pain, it was shoved away alongside the rest of it all.

And that wasn't something he wanted. He wanted to remember the tom but he seemed unable to even think of him before memories and pictures of the tom's body popped into his head, swarming and filling up everything with the tom and everything that had

happened, the fear in his tone, the blood surrounding him, the glazed—

A tall and slim silver tabby slipped over to him, peering at his figure as though she expected him to fall over any moment. Really, that was how he felt, and he could barely see the she-cat's approaching form; it blurred with everything else around the camp.

Her tail waved and a smaller cat approached; this cat had long limbs and black paws, and seemingly a happy smile spread across her gray-green features. Yet maybe the latter hue was so blurry because of his head. But it was clear they were there to help.

How could they help? He didn't know. The first she-cat peered to him and her maw stretched and closed in rapid motion; he simply watched, blinking as though it would help him see better. Though it didn't, and she simply lifted a paw full of herbs to his maw.

Jerking backward out of surprise, he soon noticed a lot more moss and dried up leaves upon his back, as the crackling noise gave it away. Reaching forward, he lapped up the herbs, assuming that they had meant for him to take them. The second she-cat offered some moss and he went to bite it, but she pulled it back.

He could tell they were laughing but there was little he could do except just biting at it again. He didn't understand. Pantherleap would've known. But he was gone and Adderheart was alone and so frustrations rose again, tears easily blurring his gaze.

Though the silver tabby took the moss and showed him what to do; she simply drew her tongue across it and lapped it up. So he did the same and found water to be soaked in it, quickly lapping up some more before he grew tired and laid his head back onto his paws. There was little to do now, with the exhaustion sweeping more prominently over his figure as moments passed.

And eventually, he drifted away. It wasn't any sort of fake slumber, rather a real one — induced by herbs, perhaps, but it was real and not caused by injury or panicking. The world was dark, but it was warm darkness that he didn't exactly dislike.

Not yet.

chapter forty six

When he next woke, the area around him was much clearer.

It wasn't that blurry anymore and he could see his own paws beneath him. One was all wrapped up in all sorts of herbs and moss, plastered with cobwebs and various other green bits. Yet the other only had a few cobwebs that scattered upward from where his paw ended.

The ground no longer seemed to shift as he did, and the world was anchored around him. He was in some form of a den, with sticks and some sort of tree root above him. Twisting momentarily, he finally surveyed the area that he'd been put into.

He was beside, or rather tucked underneath, one of the two trees' roots. He didn't know which one it was but that didn't really seem to matter. The root seemed to have been pushed up and he was tucked snugly beneath it. Moss and some sticks were woven above him, and it smelled somewhat nice, too.

Sunlight slowly filtered into the small den, peeking through the branches above his head. Dappling his pelt with its warmth, he settled down a little more and realized that he was settled on a mossy nest. Peering down, he caught sight of his heavily injured pelt, and soon enough caught sight of the herbs plastered atop it too. But it was safe now. Except it wasn't.

The second he was awake, his mind immediately plagued him with Pantherleap. The days of forgetting he was gone were over, apparently. Every time he laid his skull down, the tom would pop into his head.

You're not being sad enough.

His stomach grumbled irritably as though in agreement, but that one didn't even make sense. But it didn't just *go away*; it was stuck there, like a cobweb on a bloody wound, like how water stuck to a

cat's pelt and only left after being shaken off.

You probably didn't even love him.

Evidently, that one was fake. But still, it didn't move, it simply stayed and hissed its words at him over and over again as if he would listen, as if it would help. And no matter how hard he tried to shove them away, they stayed.

He died thinking you loved him.

Some were stemmed off others, and the more and more they stemmed from each other, the less it made sense. The worse part was that he knew it was fake and that he knew it couldn't be true. But they just wouldn't go away.

You didn't even try to save him.

And the more and more he fired back, with things like *I couldn't have helped, I was fighting* or *he was killed by Cougarstar, and he was going to kill me, too!* the more his brain continued to make things up that wasn't true.

It's not Cougarstar's fault, it's yours.

It seemed like that one was the worst. He tried to get rid of it but it just stuck, inching further and further into his head now that it had learned that it hurt him. The tom knew they were all dumb but he couldn't get rid of them. He was trapped in his own skull.

You killed him.

Ears pinning, he laid his head down on his paws before a harsh spark of pain lit up the mangled one and he lifted his skull swiftly. Peering down to it, he frustratedly laid his head down on the ground, setting his jaw.

Probably didn't even love him if you went and killed him.

I did love him! He thought, eyes brimming with fresh tears. How come everything was going wrong? His mate was gone and now his stupid head wouldn't leave him alone. His stupid, stupid head

wouldn't stop making up lies and he couldn't even do anything about it.

Shifting to hide his face so no passerby could see him, the tom simply sat and allowed tears to flow freely. Staining the ground beneath him and allowing his face to grow damp, he found that now there was nothing he could do.

Any scrap of power that he had previously gained over anything within his own life had faded within only half a moment. As soon as his paw had been messed up, as soon as Pantherleap was gone, as soon as the battle was over, as soon as Nova and Tawn had wanted to help him, it was all over. And now he was trapped and unable to go back.

It was as though two large rocks, before unseen, had suddenly popped up without a warning. One was going back to SageClan. That posed many problems; where would they think he'd gone? And why had he returned to SageClan so slowly? He could sense the many eyes, burning and harshly creating tons and tons of miniature holes to burn into his pelt.

The other was staying. That evidently posed problems, too; he didn't know anyone in the rogue group. What if they decided they didn't want him? Or if they were as bad as SageClan? He would have to make all new friends. And he wouldn't even do it in the place where they would bury his mate back at SageClan.

I won't even get to see him one last time.

A new kind of pain rocketed through him. A deep, searing pain that he felt as though he had truly experienced, for his situation was specific and no other could go through it. Shutting his eyes, he tried to will the world away. Maybe it would go away if he tried hard enough.

It didn't. It stayed, harsh and unforgiving, allowing cold winds to seep through his makeshift den and nip at his paws and his whiskers. Shivering, Adderheart couldn't ignore his belly any longer.

Growling loudly, he tried to shift out and found that using his paw as an anchor to get out was the easier way to do so. He couldn't sit up straight in the small den due to the sticks being so tightly woven above him, but he didn't really mind.

As soon as he was out, Adderheart seemed to realize why there was so much protection around him. It was cold. The wind was harsh and biting, and the sun's light did little to warm him up, despite its dappling across the world around. There was even a light layer of snow that numbed the tom's paws.

Perhaps that would be good for walking.

Struggling to his paws, he tried to keep pressure off the heavily injured one, but all he tried to do seemed instantly to fail.

At first, he thought that walking normally would work. Evidently, it didn't, as he simply went crashing toward the ground. Knocking his skull upon the lightly snowy ground was painful, but he struggled upward and awkwardly tried to balance so that he could lift his paw but still use it to walk toward wherever prey would be.

He'd spotted what seemed to be a small pile near the edge of camp, and of course, it was in a space that was far away from where he was. Though his new strategy failed, he attempted to simply just lift his paw as he struggled along. That one allowed a little bit of success; he hopped along for a bit before hovering the mass of herbs and cobwebs above the ground.

All at once, voices appeared within his senses and he grew startled, looking around the camp.

A few cats were scattered at the edges of them, watching him struggle toward the fresh-kill pile, and a wave of shame easily overtook him. *Pantherleap would've helped.* A new surge of pain and sadness covered him like an abandoned blanket that nobody wanted.

Near the corner was a thin white-and-black patched tom, sitting aside a tom who had the exact same pelt pattern, yet he was tall in comparison. Their amber-yellow eyes burned four holes into his

pelt, their tails curled harshly around their paws as they seemed to almost glower. But they weren't. They were simply watching while they still guarded their expressions.

With his classic brown tabby pelt smoothing against his frame, a young tom with a piercing amber gaze peered at him from one of the edges of the camp. He didn't seem to be angry; he only held a sharp curiosity that seemed insatiable. But he didn't move and he didn't get up. He only watched, blinking, unmoving.

A brown gaze caught his attention and he noted the final cat in the clearing. Her short tan fur held white and black spots, and she seemed to be the least interested in him of the group. The rogue simply just stared up at the sky, and her honey-brown eyes only momentarily flitted down to survey him. He couldn't tell if she was being critical or just surveying him.

None of them moved as he continued to try and struggle his way toward where the prey was. Hopping awkwardly, he was only able to move a bit more before he crashed onto the ground.

With an upset huff, the tom lifted his good paw and rubbed his gaze with it. Putting it back down, and with a half-hiccup rising, the warrior rose unsteadily to his paws. Lifting the bad one, he curled it beneath himself and attempted to skitter closer and closer to the pile.

Now he could at least see the prey — it was clear that there were a few pieces of prey, though it wasn't abundantly full. A small mouse lay atop the pile, coated in a light layer of snow, and beneath it was a much larger bird, its black feathers contrasting harshly with the pristine snow around it.

Once he got there, he'd pick the mouse. It was the polite thing to do when he'd only been invited. *Do they even want me to stay?... probably not. I wouldn't contribute anything.* A brief frown surfaced and his eyes darted around once more, finding that all four of the rogues were now staring at him, their pairs of eyes scorching his pelt even in the crisp and cold weather.

Immediately, he tumbled to the ground, knocking his jaw against

the ground. Swallowing an agonized whimper, he clamped his jaw shut and then sat up, looking around. All four cats now had pity in their gazes.

The silence was suffocating. The only thing that was able to break it was his falling, and even then, that only lasted a few moments before the hush returned again. His struggles and the light lashing of his tail would shatter it, too, but never for long. The lull in chatter always returned.

"Hello?"

His voice was quiet and shaky but it was there, and it swirled around him and the camp. It was almost taunting him, as though making fun of him for even daring to speak, even thinking that it would be a good idea. *Why would you talk? It's all your fault Pantherleap died. You don't even deserve to speak.*

The young tom rose first, and as he spoke in a fairly happy tone, he waved his brown tabby tail in a greeting. "Wasari's the name."

Following him was the tan-furred she-cat, who lifted herself elegantly off the ground with a swift dip of her skull following the motion. "Arsenas, it's good to meet you."

Both black-and-white cats stood — seemingly at the same time, too. The one that rose taller said, "Hemlock."

"Aelous," introduced the second with a dip of his skull. "Do you need help?"

Feeling weak and useless, the tom nodded.

Immediately, the rogues seemed to swarm around him and he shifted away, a harsh panic rising quickly. Why were they so willing to help? Weren't they mean and bad? The tan she-cat and both of the black-and-white rogues came to his side and hoisted him upward.

And then suddenly he was off the ground, no longer standing, no longer touching the one thing that seemed to be constant. Panic filled him and he thrashed momentarily in their grip, yet the she-cat

lifted her tail and flicked it harshly in the air to gain his attention.

"You'll be alright," she said sincerely, shuffling as they continued to walk.

All over again, he wanted to cry, unable to forget all the times that Pantherleap had been so kind and so caring to him. For how long had he believed these cats were bad or wrong? He should've known that they were nice and willing to help.

His mentor popped into his skull, and her death soon followed; a skirmish with the rogues. *It was her fault.* These cats had never done anything really wrong to the Clan cats. Cougarstar had just pushed it too far, as he usually did, and everyone jumped to whatever conclusions they could reach, which often were vicious and rude.

Brief anger flooded him. *Cougarstar probably hated the rogues so much because of Tawn and Nova.*

Yet it faded away, leaving nothing but the sadness that had been buried by the rest of the feelings that had overcome him so swiftly. His ears pinned as the three cats gently laid him upon the ground, and he noted right away that snow had been cleared from where he'd been laid.

Remembering the time that Finchtansy had cleared an absurd amount of snow from camp, a spark of guilt lit his dark gray gaze. *I left her there. And I left anyone else who doesn't know any better, too.* He briefly thought of Willowdapple's kits but the thought shattered as soon as it had existed.

Wasari approached him and gently laid down the large, black-feathered bird from the fresh-kill pile in front of him.

"Oh, n-no, I can't eat th-this much... just get—"

"We'll eat what you don't finish," Aelous told him, sitting down, and Hemlock did the same. Both cats were fairly close and Adderheart couldn't help but inch away. *They'll fall in love with you and then they'll leave you,* his mind snarled, and he flinched.

The tan she-cat seated herself, too, tail wrapping around her paws

with a pleasant expression scrawled across her features. "Your name?" She asked with a curious though kind expression, skull tipping.

"Adderheart," he answered, voice shaking like a leaf in a cold leaf-bare's wind.

"He's the cat from SageClan, then," Aelous murmured, and Hemlock nodded.

Wasari looked interested. "What's SageClan all about? I hear cats like Nova and Tawn aren't even allowed there, and whenever they are discovered, they're killed. It's not like that here. Our leader's fair and just and very kind, I'm not—"

"Wasari!" Arsenas snapped, her voice like a knife through fabric. "Haven't you learned not to ask prying questions?"

Even though Adderheart wouldn't have minded answering in a different life, bringing that all up was like putting saltwater directly into a wound. Cats like Nova and Tawn weren't allowed back in SageClan. And that was the entire reason that his mate was gone. And that he was alone.

And that I'm here.

His ears pinned, and Arsenas noticed this immediately. "I'm sorry, he's young and doesn't know any better," she apologized with a sincere dip of her skull forming. "I'll have to talk to Maya."

"She's my trainer," Wasari piped up helpfully.

"Unofficially," Aelous commented, and Wasari frowned. "We all pitch in to help with training cats like Wasari. But they have one main trainer who helps out the most, usually. Some have two."

"Like Boulder," Wasari added happily.

"Boulder's not here anymore," Aelous told him sharply, sending him an edged glare. "Maybe it's in your interest not to bring up things relating to the battle?"

Adderheart would've had to agree; it grew harder and harder to stop the tears from flooding his dark gray eyes. Emotions continued to surge upward, alongside thoughts that didn't want to leave him alone — *it's your fault Boulder died* was easy to come to mind, followed by the harsher *how many deaths did you cause?*

"Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"He's talkative, I apologize," Arsenas commented, looking at Wasari with a harsh glance. He shifted and grimaced, yet the she-cat offered Adderheart a soft and polite gaze.

Stinging panic rose within him and he blurted, "I'm n-not— here for a m-mate, s-sorry."

They stared at him, bewildered. An awkward silence settled between the group, taking up every orifice, squeezing between every spot where there *was* a spot, stealing air from around them... Adderheart struggled silently, gaze darting from cat-to-cat, realizing what he had said with a paw rising furiously to his skull.

"S-sorry, I— got distracted— I know y-y-you don't... d-don't want..."

His words trailed off and his ears pinned further to his skull as he looked down to the bird. It had not a single bite taken out of it, so he took a large bite of it, not caring if feathers got into his meal. He chewed quickly as the rogues stared.

"Do we need to get Tawn?" Aelous muttered.

"Nova could help him, maybe," Hemlock mewed quietly.

"He's weird," Wasari stated bluntly.

"It's not his fault," Arsenas scolded all three of them, her eyes narrowing as she lifted herself from the ground. Her skull shook. "I apologize for all of their behaviors. I promise this isn't what we're usually like."

"Hey!" Wasari exclaimed, yet Arsenas glared daggers and he, muttering, stopped talking.

"Aelous and Hemlock, go hunting. Wasari, go do something else unless you're going to stop talking about the battle and the differences between SageClan and this group." Her orders were as swift as a deputy's yet he doubted she was one. Her short tan pelt still seemed to glow with youth.

Palewhisker wasn't the greatest example. Logic broke through the wall of idiocy that had recently surrounded him and Adderheart considered this fact true, up until *he was great!* surged angrily within his skull.

Hemlock rose first, swiftly dipping his skull to Adderheart before he left the camp with a few easy bounds. With a huff, Aelous also lifted himself from the ground and tipped his head to the SageClanner before leaving the camp. Wasari, though, just stayed with a half-subdued expression on his face.

"Do you want us to leave?" Arsenas asked soon after, the softness from her gaze having long disappeared. In its place was a simplicity that only she seemed to cradle.

Adderheart shrugged. It wouldn't matter anyways. Arsenas nodded after a moment, understanding soon glittering within her eyes. She swished her tail toward the young brown tabby nearby, and with that, Wasari and the she-cat were padding off.

He was alone once more.

And this time, it's your fault.

chapter forty seven

Adderheart stared down at the bird beneath him. Everything seemed to get worse and worse as days went on, but did he stop moving to consider anything that was going on? No. He couldn't. He had to keep going.

Even if his paw was ruined, he had to keep walking, to some degree. Unhappily plucking some feathers from the bird's figure, he took a bite of the meat beneath, finding it to taste almost stale as though it had been buried underground and saved. *Maybe it had been.*

His tail swished harshly as he peered around the clearing and he spotted Tawn entering the camp alongside Nova. The two had their heads tilted toward each other, murmurs quietly shared between them. The camp seemed to be waking up, with a few more cats slipping toward the center of camp.

Everyone seemed to group up into smaller sectors — it was as though groups of friends had been established and it would be impossible for him, the ex-Clanner, to fit in. A few older cats shuffled off to the side, and he noticed one of them was the tall slim silver tabby from before. The one who'd offered him herbs, he supposed; she herself had a few herbs pressed into what seemed to be wounds.

A small black-and-white striped she-cat trotted after the silver tabby, and the two of them shifted off to the side, tails swishing as they began to chatter quietly. He couldn't make out what they were saying. A tom of a sleek, sooty-toned pelt joined them, as well a pale sandy-yellow she-cat with many cobwebs plastered along her figure.

Yet, nearby, a small group gathered too. Sola and Salem were clearly situated toward the middle, with Sola rising seemingly taller than the others of the group as if to protect them. She was the oldest, it appeared. Wasari was seated with the group, as well as a

small and skinny tortoiseshell with herbs littered across her pelt.

Near the entrance, a short-furred tortoiseshell sat, and a broad-shouldered tom pushed his way through the entrance. His long limbs carried him straight to the fresh-kill pile, and his dark brown pelt with white spiraling markings seemed to shine in the light of the early day. He dropped a mouse into the pile before seating himself down.

"Can everyone please come close? We have something to discuss."

Tawn's voice split the quiet murmurs of the clearing and Adderheart felt a familiar anxiety swirl within him. *This is a Clan meeting. Except it's not a Clan. It's just a meeting.* His ears twitched harshly as cats inched closer to her, facing the she-cat. *So it won't be like Cougarstar's. It'll be different.*

Nova was seated close to her mate, surveying the cats with an interested look in her gaze. She didn't seem to be the deputy, but more so an advisor to Tawn, and from what Adderheart could tell, the older group of cats would also help her at times.

They had inched a bit closer, as though to surround Tawn with cats that she knew wouldn't betray her. She offered a polite dip of her skull to them and they offered it back. The stocky tawn-furred she-cat then rose to her full height — which, while tall, was definitely not as tall as Cougarstar's or Pantherleap's, he reflected with a burst of sadness like a popped balloon filling him — and allowed her skull to dip.

...to the group?

The cats gathered around allowed their heads to bob in respectful response to her motion and she looked back to Adderheart. He shifted as her gaze landed and met his, and the pale-furred tom felt a chill run quickly down his spine.

She slightly nodded her skull to him and he, uncertainly, returned it; at this motion, he could see Nova smile for a half moment before it dissipated, and the leader allowed a small sparkle to enter her gaze before she focused back on the rest of the group.

"Thank you for gathering so quickly," she told them all with her skull momentarily lifted, looking at everyone. "I appreciate it."

Everyone murmured a *"no problem"* or a *"you're welcome"* in response

"In case you didn't know," Tawn started, "recently, there was an attack made by us on SageClan. We managed to take many lives, some of which deserved it, and, I realized, some of which didn't." She bowed her head as though in a defeated manner; in that despite the victory that they had scored, it felt like a loss.

"Who?" A cat spoke up from the crowd, and whoever it was seemed easily to dissipate into the crowd.

"A couple of them didn't follow Cougarstar's rules and were caught in the crossfire of his idiocy," she stated. Her words oozed with eloquence as she spoke, tail swishing. "And I know that a cat here has managed to get away."

Within a second, a few gazes turned back on him and he wanted to cry and vomit at the same time. *Stop looking at me! I didn't do anything wrong!* It felt like everyone was judging him for being a Clan cat, it felt like everyone was upset with him because he just followed Cougarstar's ways.

I tried! I tried! He tried to conceal the frustrations and worries that were now popping up far too quickly for him to even try to keep in check. It was as though the cold wind from leaf-bare's grasp was finally infecting him and causing all to fall apart. When it had been greenleaf, nothing had been wrong.

Leaf-fall had ruined it all.

His expression dropped and he kneaded his good paw into the ground beneath him for a moment, swallowing anxiously. It seemed as though they were looking at him for far longer than they really were; staring, burning holes into his pale pelt.

And he couldn't patch them up, and he couldn't help at all. He was all alone, stranded on an island where everyone could view him for their own entertainment. His tail swished harshly, and he bit down

on his tongue, watching.

"Even if by our help, a warrior from that Clan who follows and holds none of Cougarstar's belief is with us. He's just like Nova and me; he formerly had a mate — my brother, actually — in SageClan, which was not allowed, yet his mate didn't make it out of the battle."

The group went silent and bowed their heads, and the tom couldn't help but try to fight off the few tears that now bubbled up in his eyes. He didn't want to think about Pantherleap but now everywhere he turned, the warrior was settled. In the corners of his skull, buried in thoughts in motions... he was everywhere but nowhere. He was gone. And Adderheart was alone.

Tawn lifted her skull after a moment. "He is injured and unable to care for himself."

A light murmur swept through the camp, and most of it was tinged with pity. Though some were clearly touched with concern, and a few gazes flitted back to him. It was clear now, and a new wave of anxiety surfaced. Its frothy edges, infected by light nervousness, quickly consumed him and he shifted as though their eyes were cutting holes in his body.

It was just like earlier, yet escalated to a harsher degree, in that now he was a piece of fabric. Anything could break him, and these cats simply looking his way caused cracks and his edges to fray. Any sort of defense that he had managed to build up was simply obliterated.

Shivering, like the cold air around him was only adding to the problems that he couldn't stop from growing and growing, the tom peered over to the she-cat as she cast her eyes back to him.

"And after consideration, I've decided I think I would like him to stay. However, I would like to know everyone else's thoughts, so please speak up now." Her gaze soon enough traveled the camp, resting upon certain members of the group with light sparks of interest flitting within her dark golden.

Wasari piped up, "I spoke to him earlier, he's a bit weird, but I think he could stay."

A snicker ran through the crowd, yet a creamy-pelted she-cat sent the classic brown tabby a sharp glare. He shifted back and seemed to knock into a smaller she-cat beside him, whose lip curled.

Brief relief swarmed him. Cats actually liked him? His eyes quickly swept around the area and he seemed to realize as quickly as the relief disappeared that he hardly knew any of these cats. Those that had spoken up, so far, only spoke up because they'd talked to him. Some of the others, though, were injured from what his Clan had done. *Do they blame me?*

Sola lifted her tail. "He was around when Salem and I were taken. I don't believe he did much, Cougarstar was the main instigator." She cast her eyes to Salem.

The black-furred tom nodded, his eyes flitting back to Adderheart. "I trust him. He doesn't seem to be able to do much harm anyways, I doubt he could harm the group."

A white tom with leopard markings nodded in agreement. "I think Adderheart will be a fine addition," he rumbled.

Sparks of shock ran swiftly through his figure. *How does he know my name?* The pale-furred tom looked to him and found that he looked incredibly similar to Nova. *Are they related? Did she speak to him?* Fear shivered its way down his spine.

Have they all been gossiping about me? His dark gray gaze flitted around the clearing as though he expected cats to suddenly hop up and say his name. As though he expected them to suddenly change their minds... as though they were all to turn on him, just as SageClan had done when he had made one tiny mistake.

It seemed so far away; now he was with the rogues that his mentor had been killed by, that countless members of SageClan had been killed by. *Pantherleap was killed by them* split his thoughts and he rocked in his spot, brows knitting, and a few cats cast him confused gazes. Panic sprung up further, and he swallowed through a

tightening throat.

The small and skinny tortoiseshell offered a confused look to Wasari, who she was sitting with. "How do we know he's not going to be exactly like Cougarstar?"

"He won't," Nova spoke loud, her voice clear as she peered to the shiny-gazed she-cat. "Emesan, he will pull his weight once he's better. He doesn't deserve life back in SageClan. It would be a ruinous society to send him back to."

"How do we know?" A thin white she-cat commented, peering to the smaller cat.

"Faevyli," Aelous interrupted, "I know you're her trainer, but you don't have to agree with her because of that."

"I'm not," the she-cat commented, "thanks for asking, though; I just think it's idiotic of us to let this tom in. He needs help but we cannot offer that."

"Why not?" The tall silver tabby commented from before, her deep blue eyes flashing to meet Faevyli's.

"Because we have our own group to care for," she answered, voice as sharp as an edge of glass. "We need to rebuild our own resources before we let any former Clanners in."

"You say 'we' as though he is not already included in that," Nova pointed out, "he's already being helped and 'using up' our resources. We pool our prey and minimal herbs, and if he needs it, why not help?"

"Because he was part of SageClan," Emesan muttered, "and he'll just follow their ways."

"Were you not listening?" The silver tabby mewed sharply, "his mate was Pantherleap. He would have no reason to follow their ways. Our help probably means everything to him."

It did. He was glad that there were cats willing to help, but he felt torn. SageClan was where his mate was, and if he were to ever want

to go back, could he? Would these cats keep him confined here? *What if I wanted to leave?*

That caused pain to rise. The very thought of moving now seemed to allow a sharp ache to rise within any portion of his body. It hurt every part of him as though his paw's pain transferred to everywhere else. He knew other parts hurt, too.

Like his heart, but that was just something different altogether.

Emesan had gone silent, and her tail had wrapped irritably over her paws.

"...deserve it," she snapped quietly to her group. Said group consisted of Wasari, Salem, and Sola, though, and the latter offered her a glare. "What?" She said innocently.

"You're being rude," clarified Sola, "he's done nothing wrong. Because he's from a Clan which you don't like, suddenly you hate him? You don't even know him."

"And neither do none of you," Faevyli huffed, "I'm confused, I thought we were for the group, not for random Clanners who happened to be caught in the wrong place at the right time. We wouldn't do this for anyone else. Just because he had a tom as a mate doesn't mean anything."

"In case *you* weren't listening, his mate was Tawn's brother," Nova stated, voice controlled and powerful. She lifted her skull as she peered down to Faevyli, and the thin white she-cat looked right back up at her.

"I'm not meaning to be disrespectful," Faevyli stated, a dismissive flicker of her whiskers forming. "I just feel as though letting him in because of that is not a fair reason. After all, his mate's gone, and his mate would've also been Cougarstar's brother."

"In case you forgot," a sooty-furred tom piped up in a sharp tone, peering momentarily to the she-cat who had spoken before continuing in an equally harsh tone, "Tawn's also Cougarstar's brother, and—"

A slim pale ginger tom interrupted, "That's not good reasoning, but I do see what you mean. He is a former Clanner, but that's not why he shouldn't be allowed in. It's leaf-bare, and for all we know, Cougarstar's heir will attack us incredibly soon."

Emesan cast him an irritated look. "August, you're either on our side or not," she snapped.

Sola retorted, "There are no sides. It's just something we're trying to figure out."

The silver she-cat from earlier cast Sola a sharp look. "There seem to be sides," she commented.

"*Mhmm*," Salem muttered, shaking his skull. The silver tabby shot him a look and the tom went silent, though he peered down to his paws with a sharp glare within his eyes.

The group went silent, save for the few mutterings of a few cats, and Nova looked around the group with her eyes sharp and almost furious. She was silent, though, and the few mutterings that had plagued the group for a little longer suddenly dissipated. Adderheart shifted uncomfortably, directing his eyes to the ground.

What if friendships split because of this? *Then it'd be all my fault. And then nobody would like me, and I'd definitely have to go back to SageClan.* A spark of panic lit within his dark gray eyes and he shifted swiftly in his position, his eyes wandering around the camp.

Emesan was staring at the back of Faevyli's head, trying to get the she-cat's attention. Eventually, Faevyli did peer back to her and the smaller she-cat gave an exasperated sigh. Faevyli nodded in agreement, yet Sola, who was seated nearby Emesan, glared. Salem shook his skull and Wasari did the same.

Faevyli hissed to gain Sola's attention before shaking her skull fiercely in response, and Sola's lip curled. Aelous growled a little, staring straight at Faevyli, who set her gaze back up toward the leader. Yet, along the way, it caught upon Nova's deep purple-blue eyes.

They were sharp, a simple stone cut from only one emotion. Though, what was that emotion — that was impossible to tell. Her gaze was concealed by the rubble, though it was clear she was unhappy by her strict posture. She was sitting up straight and looked down on nearby cats. From what Adderheart could tell, she was usually a lot more relaxed.

So what was to happen now? Was he allowed to stay? *What if Emesan or her trainer confront me after? what if they don't talk to me?* His eyes swept the group as though to ask the question to cats who were not looking at him, anxiously waiting for something to happen.

And what if more cats agree with them, but won't speak up? Or what if Bearpatch comes and attacks and takes me back to SageClan? Fear rose swifter than before, clamping tightly down on his skull. *No, no, I can't go back.*

His tail swished harshly around his figure as though he was hiding something at the base of his figure. Though the only thing he really wanted to hide was a growing panic as the silence stretched longer and longer. All the while, his mind made up stupid things that he couldn't even stop.

What if Emesan and August and Faevyli all team up on me and say mean things? Or what if they try to hurt me? A stone dropped in his stomach and his breathing easily was thrown off course, speeding up as though someone had pressed the gas pedal within a car. He panted suddenly, trying to gain control as his mind continued to race ahead of the fading logic in his skull.

"So?" Tawn prompted.

"Yes," Nova interrupted before anyone could speak.

Salem and Sola nodded silently, as did several other members of the group.

"Agreed," the sooty-furred tom chimed in.

Emesan said nothing, and neither did Faevyli.

Tawn's tail lifted. "Then it is settled," she stated, "Adderheart will stay with us, and you will treat him as though he has been with us this whole time. If I discover anyone doing anything that you know you're not meant to be doing, consequences will fall upon you." Her gaze snapped to Emesan. "Understood?"

The group nodded.

"Good," she said, peering around as her strict aura seemed to disappear as she offered a smile and added, "then the meeting is dismissed."

chapter forty eight

The days following were interesting.

As days went by, he found that cats were willing to talk to him, and some even were willing to help him. Some offered prey whereas others just stopped by when they were able to and tried to hold a conversation. That never worked because he'd always just sit there, and he would worry about what he was to say, and they would end up leaving, and he'd be alone again.

But he supposed that the thought was nice. It was nice of them to try harder to get to know him — particularly, Nova, who he found often dropped by to talk to him about the different rogues in the group. The slim and beautiful silver she-cat was named Aurelian, and she had been one of the ones to kill Cougarstar.

Milo was the tom with the sooty fur, and Dandelion was the sandy-pelted she-cat. The large white tom with large and patchy leopard markings was Nimbus, and he was Nova's sister. That hadn't been too much of a surprise to him. They looked pretty similar, at least Adderheart thought so.

August was the slim ginger tabby, Maya was creamy with off-white patches and Wasari's trainer, Lyra was the she-cat with the ivory-gray pelt alongside darker tabby stripes — she trained Salem. And of course, despite all the other cats, Nova had given him quite the description of Faevyli and Emesan.

There was nothing inherently wrong with either of them. They were polite, respected cats and had strong opinions. Faevyli, particularly, had trained Emesan never to step down and never to be repressed; Nova supposed this was because Faevyli's sister was a Clan cat.

"Juniperflight or something," she had said nonchalantly. Yet immediately, Adderheart's skull had lifted as he peered over to her. "Do you know that name?" Of course, that had been the follow-up.

"She— she was my mentor," he explained, "and died at a fight near the border."

"Really? She didn't die from that, as far as I was aware," Nova commented, a frown twisting itself across her features. "She had been pregnant with a third litter, and we think it was with some tom named Fox. He wasn't really associated with our group but everyone thought he was, so Juniperflight went out to go and attack him."

Confusion had so quickly risen that Adderheart had nearly missed the words she had said afterward.

"She found him and he'd been upset that she didn't have any of their kits. She went to attack him, yet he killed her first and managed to kill her entire litter, too. We think she had two others with him and kept getting pulled back because he was like Cougarstar."

"Marigoldcry, Fluffyflame, Dustshade, and Streamfang," he mewed in a quieter tone, "those were her— other litters. As far... as far as I know. Juniperflight was my mentor."

So that day he had learned something he'd believed for so long was a lie, and such was now common. It seemed as though the group harbored all sorts of secrets that were hard to see from the perspective of a SageClanner, and Nova was willing to share a lot of them with him.

Nesro, a broad-shouldered and long-limbed dark brown tom with white spiraling marks, was the father of a litter in SageClan. The rogue considered himself more of a fluid loner, Nova had explained, in that he thought he could come and go whenever he wanted while still providing for the group. It was a nice exchange, the she-cat supposed.

Somehow, Adderheart managed to figure out that if nobody knew the litter, it had to have been Willowdapple's. He had seen the tom around camp and it was an easy connection to the two now-deceased kits. If nobody knew the kits or the mother, and all were dead now — this was an upsetting fact to say aloud — then that meant the kits were too new, and Willowdapple's litter had

definitely been new.

He also learned that several cats had died from the rogue's group due to the battle. Boulder, a broad and tall dark gray tom, had been fighting for far too long before he collapsed and was unable to get back up again. Dot, a white on black dotted tom, had suffered the same fate, and a sleek dark gray tabby named Colin had been trapped by several SageClanners with no rogue to help.

In return, he offered to her that he knew that Pantherleap was gone. And that Willowdapple and her kits were. He didn't know any of the other cats that had died, but it didn't matter. Tears flowed quickly and that conversation was over instantly. Nova apologized and stood up, quickly skittering off as he simply sat alone in his little 'den'.

That had been the day before, though.

Now he was settled against his home, deciding that being inside of it all the time would only ruin its purpose. Besides, he probably needed the moss and sticks above changed out. The sky above him was dark and cloudy, and he couldn't understand why it wasn't snowing. It felt so cold like someone was taking away pieces of his fur.

Perhaps that was due to his large jump in physical health, though. Walking was still an issue, as his paw still posed problems as it had before. Yet he could now move around easier, and speaking was growing a little easier. Everything still seemed difficult in general... but it was growing easier.

And as the time skipped on and on, deep within him a fear grew; that he was forgetting Pantherleap. That everyone would forget Pantherleap. Nobody would remember him because he was simply another dead cat that was killed in the battle, and what if Bearstar was just as bad as Cougarstar was?

He didn't want to assume anything, but he probably was. If the tom was just going to follow in his father's pawsteps, then he would never go back— that was another thing. Did he want to go back? Memories of soft and sweet things were tied to the territory, not the

camp. His mate's memories, though, were tied to the camp.

Adderheart knew that Pantherleap probably wanted him to be happy. But Adderheart knew that he could only be happy with Pantherleap; without him, he was just alone.

Tears pricked fresh at the edges of his gaze and he looked away, harshly thumping his tail against the ground a few times as he exhaled. Peering to the ground, he stared at it, as though he was hoping it would swallow him up if he kept on looking.

Around him, the sharp wind of leaf-bare seemed to swirl harsher and harsher, and as though someone had noticed his desolate look, a she-cat strolled up with a mouse clamped within her jaws.

"Adderheart?" It was the tall and slim silver tabby — Aurelian. Her deep blue eyes were sparking with something like concern. "Are you alright?"

He nodded mutely and reached for the mouse she offered. Yet, her paw flashed out and she quickly inched the mouse away from him. "What? I thought—"

She cut him off. "How are your injuries? Do you need more herbs?"

"No," he answered. "I'm feeling better."

"Physically?" The she-cat guessed, and he looked to the ground. *She knows. I don't have to lie. She was there when it happened, and she understands. It's okay to tell the truth.*

A surge of anger overcame him at such a thought, briefly subsiding as he peered to her soft gaze. Panic seemed to spark and the anger faded overall, worry and anxieties easily transferring to uncontrollable panic. What if she was just being nice because she wanted to get rid of him?

The sooner that he was healed, the sooner that the group could get rid of him. Maybe that was what Aurelian wanted. Maybe she didn't like him at all and was only helping him with his injuries because she felt bad because of Pantherleap, or because that was what Tawn had demanded to occur. Or because Nova pushed her to do so.

Maybe that was what it was for all of them. Except for Nova and Tawn. Maybe. But why would they demand him to stay if they all were faking? That didn't make sense. Yet the thought stuck, like glue to a wall, and he shifted uncomfortably. Aurelian peered at him and she lifted a paw to lightly nudge at his own, and he jolted out of his thoughts.

"Hello?" She offered. "Are you alright? I can leave you alone if you want."

"I'm fine," he lied, and it was clear that she could tell.

"Do you want me to stay?" The slim silver she-cat asked, finally offering the mouse forward. He snatched it up and quickly drew it close to his figure using his good paw, taking a bite. This allowed him more time to think; more time to panic.

Do I want her to stay? The immediate answer was no because he wanted to be alone. But the secondary answer was yes because he knew that she would talk and he would be able to just think about things while she went on. He continued to chew the bite of mouse as slow as he could.

But if she stayed, then there was a chance she would eventually have other cats coming up to her. Which, in turn, meant more talking with others. And that was something he didn't want at all. *I just want to be alone. But not necessarily alone without her.*

That was weird. *No, I don't want to be alone with a she-cat.* Brief panic spiraled and he swallowed his bite, nervously peering down to his paws. The sight of his injured one caused him quickly to look up and he shifted, and the she-cat noticed this.

She lifted a paw and lightly laid it atop his injured one, as though to block his vision from seeing it.

But he jerked backward, paw lifting out of the way of her paw. "I don't l-like you," he stuttered bluntly. *Obviously she doesn't. She was trying to help! What are you doing?*

"What?" The silver she-cat questioned, peering to him with her eyes

swiftly darkening. Worry spiraled within him, and he looked at her with round eyes before she realized aloud, "oh, you mean— no, I don't either. I know you loved Pantherleap, it's okay. You're alright."

Relief quickly swarmed him, though only because it sounded to him like her voice had morphed into Pantherleap's; the words he had said so many times to the tom to calm him down seemed to echo and bounce around within his skull whenever he was upset.

And now that she was saying it aloud, it seemed as though she had turned into him. Yet, as he peered up, a small spark of worry filled him — the silver tabby clearly wasn't Pantherleap. But it didn't matter, and she simply dipped her tabby-marked skull politely to him.

"It's alright if you want to be alone," she offered, "I can leave."

Taking another impulsive bite of the prey beneath him, he chewed harshly as though it would help him decide. Of course, it didn't, and his mind just took a similar path, looping endlessly.

"I don't care," he answered, sniffling as though he had been recovering from crying.

"I'll leave you be, then," she mewed softly before rising to her paws, dipping her head to him once more. "Enjoy your meal. If you need me, just call. I'll be around."

He nodded a little. "Thanks."

"Sure," she offered once more, a small smile rising. "See you around."

The slim silver tabby waved goodbye with her tail before turning and padding off. She headed for the den where most of the warrior slept — yet they weren't exactly warriors. To him, warriors meant something different. They weren't what they used to be.

He was not a warrior himself. Unsurprisingly, he was as weak as a kit. Usually coddled in the nursery, now tossed out into the real, horrible world, he was struggling and he knew that there was nothing he could do to go back to the nursery. Now he was tossed

and whipped around in the forest of misery that he was trapped in.

The nursery was warm and soft, with Pantherleap standing guard at the entrance to welcome him in. But he couldn't go in. He was stuck outside. He could almost grasp and see the inside of where Pantherleap was settled, waiting for him to arrive... and he wanted to make the leap to join him. Yet, he couldn't.

Taking another swift bite of the prey at his paws, he shifted and his tail curled around his injured paw as though to protect it. He didn't want to hurt himself and he didn't want to disappear but he did want to go and see Pantherleap. He couldn't have both, leaving him in a state where he was furious at himself for not dying sooner.

Pawsteps interrupted his train of thought.

He peered upward with his dark gray eyes dark and haunted, as though memories constantly swirled behind them, still chewing a small portion of the mouse. A slim leopard-spotted she-cat approached with a polite expression written on her features.

"Hi, Adderheart," she greeted.

"Hi," he offered in response.

Silence settled between the two as Nova sat down, wrapping her tail over her paws as she swept the mouse toward herself with an outstretched paw. She tipped her skull to him and he nodded mutely, looking down at the ground. The she-cat took a bite before offering it back to him, whereupon he shook his head.

"No?" She prompted, "aren't you hungry?"

Sort of, he thought, but he answered, "Not really."

Nova seemed to detect the lie and she peered to him. "Are you alright? Is there something I can do to help you? Do you want a name change or something like that?"

He hadn't even thought of that. *I can get my name changed? To what?... would I want it changed? What if Pantherleap wouldn't recognize me?* A sharp stone knocked into his skull and he frowned

heavily, trying to draw his attention away from the train of thought his mind tried to barrel itself down. His ears flattened yet Nova nudged him.

The pale tom peered over to her and she politely tipped her skull, a questioning look glimmering within her eyes. In terms of relationships, she was similar to him. They both had a mate who was related to Cougarstar, and they were their mates. Adderheart tried to ignore the tears gathering within his gaze. *Had a mate. Not anymore.*

"I know you didn't mean to," she mewed quietly, and Adderheart could almost hear Pantherleap saying the same thing. "It's not your fault."

"I know," he said softly, looking at the ground before lifting his good paw and rubbing harshly at his dark gray eyes. As he put his paw back down onto the ground, he found it damp and so he shivered.

"So then it's fine for you to be upset," she offered, looking to him.

Somehow, that didn't make sense. He was allowed to know it wasn't his fault even though he still blamed himself and thought it was, in some way, his fault... yet he couldn't be upset about it. Her soft gaze didn't bother him. He knew that she liked Tawn. But everyone else's soft gazes did bother him. So he was just being bothersome, dumb, overreacting when there was no reason to.

He shifted uncomfortably and he looked down to his paw, as though he hoped it would suddenly implode and take him with it. Maybe then it would be easier. Maybe then he would be able to understand why he didn't want to be anywhere. It was alright with the rogues. *But it would always be better with Pantherleap. And I can't have him.*

Sniffling as a fresh wave of tears appeared in his gaze, he watched as Nova peered to the ground.

"I'm sorry," she stated, "I know you loved him, and I'm sorry he's gone."

The tom looked back down to his paws. He waited for the '*but you have to move on*' or consequential '*but you can't stay stuck on him forever*' yet it never came. That was all Nova said. She said nothing more, only looked at the ground and stayed silent.

Eventually, he grew uncomfortable with the silence, as with his blurring eyes it was growing harder to focus on his paws beneath him. It was as though the silence simply took up all the room that he needed to breathe and to flourish. It was as though the silence was making everything worse and escalating the tears, now seeming to trickle down his expression.

"It's okay to cry," Nova's gentle words once more split the silence. He peered at her and lifted a paw, harshly rubbing his gaze. "No, no, don't," she quickly said, lifting her own paw to swat his away from his eyes. "Don't blind yourself. It's alright to be upset. You don't have to be happy."

"I-I know," he hiccuped, sniffling. "My brain's— brain's just dumb."

It all boiled down to that in the end, anyways. It was his fault because his brain was dumb and didn't work right. Everyone else's could do the right things and deal with bad situations correctly. But his just freaked out, made him breathe way too fast, and overall did not work.

And so, as per usual, the blame fell back upon the tom, even if he didn't know it was happening. He blamed himself for Pantherleap's death, and he blamed himself for getting injured, and he blamed himself for not having helped Willowdapple or her kits, and he blamed himself for any sort of thing that went wrong. Just like always.

Because the one cat who could convince him otherwise was gone.

chapter forty nine

Time seemed to pass so slow.

Adderheart wasn't even sure he could recall a time before the battle. It was all muddled and sort of fuzzy, and he could only recall cats or names. Cougarstar's actions and the two elders stuck out, and some interactions between him and Pantherleap also made their presence known. Yet besides that? It was all messed up and he couldn't remember.

He'd told Nova after he'd cried in front of her the day before. He didn't like to cry anymore. It just felt like he was wasting his time on something he couldn't control — not what he was crying over. The fact that he *was* crying. It was a waste of time and it didn't really help anymore.

At first, it had almost helped him cope, because he could barely even get words out about what had occurred. Though now he could and crying was just a copout so he didn't have to say anything. Crying was just stupid. He didn't understand why everyone cried after bad things had happened to them.

Most of the rogues seemed fine after the battle. So why couldn't he be okay, too?

No matter how hard he tried to rid his mind of the thoughts and memories regarding Pantherleap, that seemed to be stuck. The tom was like glue, never leaving and always present. It was not always a bad thought, but it was frequently a sad one. Something like *I'll never get to see him again* followed by tears in his gaze, which of course triggered an onslaught of angry thoughts.

To him, crying over Pantherleap was just like crying over a rock. The rock wasn't going to move and nothing about it was going to be new or cool or shiny anymore. The rock had already had its time, and its time was over. And now it was time for everyone to find a new rock, and to him, it seemed like a lot of cats already had.

But he still couldn't. His paw was trapped beneath it and since the rock would not move, he had accidentally caught himself in a spot where he, too, was stuck. And so he stayed close to the rock, trying to get away before ultimately giving up. There was nothing he could do. So while everyone else moved on and saw new rocks up ahead, he could only see one single rock.

And that was all there was to it.

His little den had been upgraded, and he had since been moved to a small den on the side of the camp. Cats had spent most of the day digging a little hole for him and now there was a tiny dip in the camp's side. And after he had fallen asleep and woken up, there was a little area above it; a small overhang made of leaves and some sticks.

The area beneath was just a small nest, made of moss and carefully created. There were even a few flowers surrounding it, alongside a couple shiny and smooth pebbles. He didn't know who had made it, though he had asked Nova, and she had told him that she wasn't too sure either, leaving him a little confused.

Yesterday was the day he'd moved in. He considered a sort of move, as he no longer had to squeeze into his old home. This den was nice and comfortable and with the snow that seemed to fall and coat the ground all the more, it was overall just nicer and better. The flowers, when wilted, would disappear and reappear within a few hours and he asked a few others who had been doing it.

He'd even asked Tawn, and she said she didn't know.

The tom began to suspect it to be some form of fake trick, as though he was supposed to believe that it was some random force that was moving the flowers and replacing them with fresh ones. But he didn't know who would do that in the first place, and he wasn't about to go around asking who had moved his flowers.

Now, he was comfortably settled into his nest, peering at the flowers below. They were white yet somehow still a little creamy, and they had pleasant yellow centers. Of course, they smelled of pollen and of the forest, but of a forest that he didn't really

recognize anymore. It smelled sort of pine-y and sort of spruce-y.

Turning away from them to look around the camp, which he could see a little sliver of because of how his den was, the tom spotted a few cats milling around. They seemed to be getting ready to leave, though. His gaze soon caught upon the fresh-kill pile nearby. It was essentially empty, only harboring a few things left.

It would've been more interesting if he had been able to leave camp. Despite his physical health slowly getting better — he could walk, sort of, and he could get up by himself now, sort of, and he didn't have to have all sorts of herbs plastered on his pelt at all times anymore — he still couldn't leave camp. It was Aurelian's orders, and he had to follow what she said.

The cat he talked to the most was Nova. She often stopped by and offered a few nice words before suggesting that he talk to someone else. She had introduced him to the majority of the Clan without him actually having met many cats yet. He knew the names of most of the cats now, even if he only knew them by their name and what they looked like.

She didn't often give her own opinion on the cats of the group, but she did offer a mild personality for them. He was grateful that she was willing to talk to him, but sometimes Adderheart felt as though she was only doing it because she felt bad. Maybe that was why anyone wanted to talk to him at all; because they felt bad about what had happened.

Since the meeting, none of the cats that had wanted him out had been necessarily mean to him. But Wasari didn't talk to him, and so he worried that Emesan had gotten to the tom before Adderheart had managed to snag another conversation with him. Faevyli, of course, didn't bother speaking to him, but that was something he had expected.

The pale tom lifted himself up and he watched as Sand, a spotted sandy she-cat, called together the group of cats that were milling around the camp — this happened to be Irena, a short-furred tortoiseshell, Dandelion, an older pale yellow-pelted she-cat, and Wasari. Surprise lightly flitted through the tom but he listened in on

their conversation. What else was he supposed to do?

"We should hunt," Sand suggested, strolling forward as the three others padded to surround her. Wasari's skull dipped in agreement and Adderheart could see his eyes flit to him.

"...invite him?" The tom had lowered his voice a little and was staring straight at Adderheart. He could guess what he was saying, though, and the former warrior couldn't help but feel a spark of anxiety.

I can barely get up. I can't go hunting. Don't let me go, say no. Don't—

"Perhaps," Sand spoke, turning to him. She tipped her skull before politely asking, "would you like to come with us? We're going hunting. Maybe we could show you the territory, so it's easier for when you'll go exploring?"

Her tone was nice but he could almost sense the annoyance of the others in the group. Perhaps he was thinking it up, making it up, like he usually did whenever something was totally fine and he was insistent on ruining it. Yet he noted that Dandelion shifted a little and Irena gave only a half-nod instead of a full one. Wasari looked a little excited but that was normal.

With his skull shaking in response, he unsteadily answered, "N-no, I'm alright... I don't think I'll be able to even walk correctly." A half-smile rose, as though he was laughing at his own misfortune.

Sand nodded. "Want me to get Aurelian so you can get some healing?" She questioned, taking a few steps toward the exit of the camp.

He immediately shook his head, and the she-cat nodded before peering back to her group. Her tail waved as though to notify them all that they were leaving, and all three of them bounded to stand behind her.

"Should we split up?" Sand had turned her back on him yet he could still hear the group.

"Maybe pairs," Dandelion suggested.

"I don't mind," Irena spoke. Her voice was smooth like honey, yet not as sweet and deeper than he had expected.

"I don't really care either," Wasari offered in his still half high-pitched tone. Adderheart could almost sense the smile that had risen on the tom's features.

"Sure, then. Pairs," Sand offered decisively, casting a curious look back to the fresh-kill pile. "Two per cat, at least three per pair though? In case someone can't get something of course."

All of the others nodded and Wasari shifted a little closer to Irena. "Can I be her partner?" He asked, casting a look up at her with a happy smile rising. *Are they related?* Adderheart doubted it but maybe it was possible.

"Yeah," Dandelion offered, "I'd hate to be paired with such a young and bothersome tom such as you, so sure, Irena, take him."

The group laughed and Adderheart was surprised by the happy mood that was contained so delicately between them all. Any sort of behavior like this in SageClan would've been considered wrong or even bad — perhaps simply just never happened in the first place. He doubted anyone was this happy back in SageClan.

Then again, what did he know?

The group, after confirming partners, nodded and headed off. Wasari excitedly slipped through the entrance, followed by a slower Irena, and Dandelion took her time practically meandering through the exit of the camp. Sand peered back around camp and offered a polite smile to him before she, too, left.

And only then did he have a strong urge to leave.

He'd been kept in the camp for so long that he barely remembered a world outside of it, though perhaps that wasn't directly caused by his prolonged stay. He didn't know any of the territory because he hadn't walked to the camp himself, and he hadn't exactly seen it before. He knew a little bit of it but that was only near the edges.

Why would he go to the edges now, though? Near the edges would

be SageClan, and he never wanted to see them again. What if he got kidnapped by Bearstar and had to go back? Then everyone would hate him. At least with the rogues, they were nice to him and were unwilling to be too rude. Besides Emesan and Faevyli obviously.

Yet he didn't want to go back to SageClan. At first, there hadn't been a difference to him. But now there definitely was and he didn't want to go back. He wanted to stay with the rogues and so he would never go to the border.

Pantherleap is at the border.

Well, that wasn't something he wanted to have thought of. If Pantherleap was at the border... suddenly, a stronger urge to get up and leave filled him and the tom could do nothing but try to struggle his way up to his paws after a momentary pause. The tom struggled out from his den and sat up, wrapping his tail around his paws.

His eyes cast longingly at the entrance and he shivered. If only he could get to the border, then maybe he could catch a smell of Pantherleap. Or perhaps he'd catch a nice SageClanner, and they'd be able to tell him where Pantherleap's body was. *I want to see him. Please let me see him.*

Ears pinning, he tried to lift himself to his paws, yet his bad paw quickly interrupted such a motion and he tumbled to the ground with a loud thump. Anger briefly burst within him like a balloon that had been popped and he shifted uncomfortably, once more pulling himself into a sitting position as to try and cover up his fall.

Looking at the camp's entrance once more, a spark of worry filled him. What if he could never walk again? Peering down to his paw, he frowned. It still hurt quite a bit but he had been given herbs for pain, and a few of them did the trick well enough so that he didn't have to struggle so much with trying to get his focus off the never-ending pain he felt.

Trying once more to lift his figure up from the ground, he could do nothing but fall. And again as he tried, he fell. And once more did he try, this time trying to limp a bit, he fell. Nothing worked. *I*

thought I could walk! I thought I was doing better!

Frustrated, he lifted his good paw and rubbed at his swiftly blurring gaze. He looked at it and tried to stand himself up on his two back paws and was able to wobble for a little bit in the air. Unsteady, he looked around him and tried to place his good paw onto the ground. Yet, before he could even start setting his paw down, he lost his balance and crashed to the ground.

Before he could scramble back into a sitting position, his ears pricked and he caught a noise. This sent a flurry of panic through him and he tried his best to get back up, yet a voice soon split the air.

"Are you alright?"

It was Nova.

"N-no," he hiccupped, words rushing out as an awkward breath of air. "I-I want to see Pantherleap at the— the border."

"Well, you're not going to get there without help," she mewed softly, approaching with something cradled in one of her paws. "I got something for you, actually, to help with walking. Aurelian told me how to make one and I wanted to help—"

"What is it?"

The she-cat laid a small object in front of him. It was... strange.

The bottom of it was smooth and had small holes created into its surface, and it looked to be made of wood. It stretched over where he assumed a paw would go, and from there it had moss straps that seemed to go around a cat's leg.

"It's a little... paw thing," she stated, "I don't know what it's called. Let me see your paw." Tentatively, he lifted a paw out for her, and she shook her head, offering, "your injured paw."

"Sorry," he muttered, feeling dumb for not having done that right away. He put his injured paw forward, and she nodded.

"It's alright. Can you put it up and down and lift it a little bit up from the ground?"

Adderheart could only do as he was told — he put his paw so that it looked like he was about to step down onto the ground, yet it hovered slightly above. Nova nodded and she used her paws to wrap the mossy straps around his leg, quickly working. Shortly after, she slipped the smoother bottom part underneath his paw.

This allowed the top part to come over the upper portion of his paw, and soon as he peered down, he found it mostly covered. The back of his paw was secured by a few moss straps, enforced by grass, and he looked back to the she-cat as she continued to fasten the device around his paw.

Using some grass she had grabbed from nearby, she used it to steady the moss straps that wrapped themselves around his leg. Eventually, she paused and tugged on it a little. Nothing moved and he could only feel a small tug, though that was sort of expected. With that, though, she pulled back.

"There you are," she offered with a small smile. "Now you can walk."

"Are— are you sure?" Adderheart's ears flattened. "What if I break it? How do I use it?"

"You just walk," she explained, "stand up and place your good paws down first. It'll make it easier, and after that, you can just walk. You won't break it, I promise."

Adderheart couldn't help but feel a spark of worry that soon transformed into a merciless flame. What if he did break it? How would she make another one? What if he still couldn't walk and he was doomed to a world where he had to ask for help every single time he wanted to move? His ears pinned further and he unsteadily looked down to it.

He was waiting for something to happen — perhaps it would break and he wouldn't have to try to walk with it. But nothing did. Nova still stood with a polite smile, her eyes twinkling slightly as she

looked at him, encouraging him silently. Pressure continued to build on him but he knew he had to try, even if she was still standing there. Even if he would've rather done it alone.

This isn't for me, it's to see Pantherleap. This is to see Pantherleap, he reminded himself after a small breath. Poison inside his head snapped, *There's no guarantee. You're dumb if you think this'll work. You're dumb, this is dumb, you're—*

Carefully, he lifted himself up and tried to ignore the voice that still rattled on in his skull. Using his body to heave himself upward, the tom exhaled as he pressed his good back paws onto the ground. Then, lightly, he placed his good paw on the ground, followed by the bad one.

He lightly just let it stay there. He was just standing. Then he put a little more pressure down on his paw, and he didn't fall. A wave of confusion followed by strong excitement followed. Adderheart continued to put little bits of pressure down before he eventually stopped and just stood there, suspended in time.

And just like that, he walked toward the entrance of the camp and exited.

Nova barreled past him, jumping and excitedly meowing, "You did it! You walked!"

He looked at the soft green grass beneath him, and despite wanting to run all the way to Pantherleap, he knew he couldn't, and so he turned back around. Slipping back into camp, Nova bounced excitedly around him, tail waving as she smiled brightly.

"You did it! I told you!" She cheered, tail flickering upward into the air as she nudged him. "Now we can go on walks together too, and discuss prey, maybe we can even hunt, too!"

"I did— I did do it," he confirmed with a slow nod, looking back at her, "I did."

Everyone can walk. You're not special.

chapter fifty

He was in SageClan's camp, and it was raining.

Immediately, Adderheart looked around him to survey what was happening. The camp was filled with cats but none of them were any that he could recognize. None of them were any of the cats that he knew. None of them looked like SageClanners.

Yet, he did see Finchtansy. He was also able to spot Bearpatch and Tinydust, alongside Marigoldcry. Panic quickly clambered through him and he spotted the faded and hazy shape of Fluffyflame. Poppyfur's pelt hovered beside the tom's, and Adderheart stumbled away.

He tried to speak but found that he had no voice. *How do I not have a voice?* Anxiety quickly spiraled and he tumbled easily to the ground as the cats around him suddenly bustled to get to where Cougarstar often called meetings. And so, as his gaze slowly turned, there stood Cougarstar.

His pelt was bloodied yet it was faded and hazy, tinged in a red hue that had never been present before. And his green eyes were no longer green — they looked red. How? Adderheart shuffled harshly back and the leader's seemingly ruined eyes swept the crowd before catching on someone.

"Pantherleap," he spat, "get up here."

The leader's voice sent tremors through Adderheart. *I thought I was free. Who put me back here? I thought Nova wanted to help me.* He looked to his paw. It was normal. It was still there. *Am I awake now? Was everything else a dream?*

He had thought Cougarstar to be bad, but Pantherleap looked... ruined.

As the tom stepped forward, it was evidently clear he had been

injured. His tail was a simple shredding of fur, and his legs and paws were covered in cuts and scratches. His back had three large scars whereas his eyes were ripped from his skull. He was blind. And his ears were torn to shreds, too.

He can't even hear him. So how did he hear that?

Without even realizing he was doing it, Adderheart jerked himself forward as though to shrink the space between him and his mate. He opened his maw to yell his name but couldn't. Nothing came out. Not a single sound. All he could hear was Cougarstar's awful tone.

"Get on the ground." His voice was controlled, as it always was. But it was more venomous, angrier, too. It was horrible and it made Adderheart do the exact same thing. Quietly did he lay his figure to the floor, ears pinning. He could do nothing. He was but a puppet in a scheme he couldn't see the ending to.

"Make him do something," a tone cut through Cougarstar's. It was Palewhisker, stepping out from behind the tom with a malicious smile on his features. "Hurt him."

"Calm," Cougarstar snapped to the crowd that had started to surge forward. "Adderheart, I see that you're laying over there. Get up. Sit next to him."

No. No. No. I can't, I can't, Cougar—

A cat nearby him shoved him to his paws and he tumbled easily beside Pantherleap. Panic consumed him like he was some sort of leaf and the emotion was a bug, eating him up. It tore up his insides and replaced it with liquid sludge. He panted for breath and stared at the ground. Maybe it would make it all go away.

But it stayed, like some sort of bad dream, and Adderheart pinned his ears as his eyes drifted to his mate. He, too, heaved for air, but Adderheart knew it wasn't because he was panicking. It was because he was dying. Life was slowly draining from his eyes, and Adderheart couldn't say a single thing to help him.

Breath hitching, the tom lifted a paw and nudged Pantherleap. *Stay awake,* he begged, *please don't go. I can't lose you, not after I thought I had the first time. Please stay, please, please...*

"Kill him."

No! I can't. I can't, I can't, I can't do that. You can't— can't make me! The words repeated themselves in his head like a mantra he refused to forget. He wouldn't kill Pantherleap, not after thinking he'd lost his mate. Not after what had happened. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

"Or we'll kill you."

His head immediately shook harshly and tears gathered in his eyes like a swift meeting had been called. He choked momentarily on the lack of air entering his system and he gasped for breath, shutting his eyes shut. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

Next to him, Pantherleap's tail harshly twitched, and Palewhisker stepped up beside him.

The deputy glared down to the tom and he flipped him on his back, allowing Adderheart's eyes to flip open as he peered to the senior warrior. Pantherleap gasped suddenly on what seemed like nothing until Adderheart noticed Palewhisker had slammed a paw down on his throat. He shook his head and he pushed into Palewhisker's head, head now shaking fiercely back and forth.

Don't, don't kill him. Leave us be! How do— do you know! How do you know— we didn't do anything!

Palewhisker didn't stop. He only flicked an ear and a cat stepped out from the crowd and harshly pinned Adderheart to the floor. Struggling suddenly, he used his back paw to kick upward and found himself kicking Marigoldcry backward.

The crowd gasped and he could suddenly sense Cougarstar beside him. The leader elegantly had hopped down, tail swishing across Pantherleap's face, not allowing him to breathe. He soon enough did the same thing to Adderheart, and the pale tom struggled harshly. He didn't want to die. Not that he was finally with

Pantherleap.

Yet his focus was fading, and it was growing harder and harder to focus on the fact that he was trying to survive. Survival seemed so far away. It was like something nobody could ever reach, not anymore.

He bit weakly into Cougarstar's tail, and the tom let out a harsh *mrrrow!* before swatting his tail into Adderheart's now open mouth. He choked, thrashing in the spot where he had been pinned. He tried to breathe but could only inhale fur, and then suddenly, he managed to get free.

Light blasted into his vision and he could see Pantherleap's limp figure beside him.

Adderheart roared — apparently able to make noise — and tried to get up, his mouth stretched wide, but Cougarstar stuffed his tail in his face and he couldn't stop it any longer. Focus was fading, and he was still trying to breathe but all there was Cougarstar and his stupid stupid face.

The light faded and the tom felt his strength drain. There was nothing left, he knew, as he tried to keep on thrashing, as he tried to keep himself alive. But it was useless. Cougarstar soon enough reached down and disgustedly bit Adderheart's throat.

Only then did he jerk for a final time before laying still.

And then he woke up.

The air around him was hot and felt too stuffy. He immediately sat up, panting and gasping for breath, trying to ignore the feeling of something being in his maw. He couldn't comprehend it all. What had even happened? His ears pinned as he looked around the camp, inhaling sharply.

He was in the rogue's camp. Everything was fine. It was raining. He was damp from rain. It was somehow hot, though. It was like the air around him was infected. He didn't know how. His gaze flickered to his paw beneath him and found that it was still there.

How had it disappeared? *It didn't.* It didn't make sense. But it didn't matter, either. Did it?

I have to see Pantherleap.

The sun was resting delicately on the horizon, peering around at the group of cats that were slow to wake — at least so far. There was nobody in camp. It was completely empty and quiet, too, save for the soft plinking of rainwater onto the ground below.

This is the perfect time. Go.

Adderheart didn't know why he felt he needed to go. He couldn't see the tom even if he had wanted to, anyways. *Pantherleap's gone. I can't. I can't go.* His figure shook but he still rose to his paws, feeling a harsh tugging in his heart.

It wasn't a normal kind of tug. It was a deep rooted, meaningful feeling that he couldn't shake off. No matter how hard he tried to push it away, it stayed. It even continued to root itself into his figure, as though it planned to ruin him. It wanted him to move, and it wanted him to move right then and there.

His gaze swept the camp as he carefully balanced himself as though he believed he would tumble to the ground if he tried too hard. But the wooden device that Nova had made worked, and the tom was able to carefully make his way to the entrance. His stomach growled loudly, and a harsh bout of weakness overcame the tom.

Peering back behind him, he quickly headed for the fresh-kill pile and took a few bites of whatever he could reach — it happened to be a tiny sparrow. He barely even took time to pluck off any of its red feathers and instead just bit into it.

The tom barely finished before he returned to the entrance after some quick-stepped walking. He found that the less he took time to actually walk, the better he was doing with it. The whole '*be careful*' thing only made him overthink walking. *You're overthinking walking? What a simple task, and you can't do it right,* his mind would always snap.

Yet now it didn't matter. Now he had to get to the border.

As he stepped out of the camp, the grass beneath him seemed all the more softer. That didn't line up with the water that settled itself on top of the soft green strands. He pressed his good front paw down into the grass before continuing.

His plan was hazy and thrown together at the last minute but it was something he thought might work. He swiftly scented the air and managed to catch a scent — it smelled like Nova's, sort of. Adderheart trailed her smell, carefully avoiding rocks or sticks in the way. He didn't want to draw attention to himself, and so making as little noise as possible would help him with that.

The pale tom wove carefully around tree after tree, thinking that they'd never end. Because no matter how far he was going, for all he knew, he'd been going in the wrong direction. He tried to pick up any sort of scent, but he wasn't sure on anything that he was able to pick up.

He somehow managed to catch a scent of a mouse, but that didn't matter. The border was the only thing that mattered to him. He needed to get there and he needed to get there as soon as he could. Weaving around another bush, he scented the air for another time. Maybe this time he'd catch something he recognized.

Cougarstar.

"Hello? Is anyone— is anyone there?" He stammered, his gaze switching around. How had it smelled like Cougarstar? *He's dead. Don't freak out.* Adderheart couldn't stop the panic from rising, though, and he nervously shifted backward, tail swishing.

As he scented the air, the scent was gone.

He quickly padded onward, his ears pinning as he headed forward. It didn't smell like the leader anymore. Attempting to get his breathing under control, his dark gray eyes swept the area to determine what was around him. Some trees. A couple rocks. Some bushes. *It's fine. He's not here, he never was. It's fine—*

Adderheart continued along and he began to recognize some of the trees around him. One twisted awkwardly and he recalled its presence. His ears pinned. He was close. Wasn't he? He had to be, at this point, right?

And then he scented the air and caught the scent of SageClan.

The tom carefully padded forward, keeping quiet. He sat himself down at the border, leaning heavily onto a tree nearby. He was tired and despite the meal he had eaten earlier, he was hungry. The feeling of his stomach flopping suddenly was something he was incredibly aware of.

Pantherleap, if you're around here, I'm here for you. I'm not here for—for anyone else. He could feel the slight heat within his gaze that usually meant tears, and he took a deep breath, peering at the ground beneath him with an exhale soon forming afterward. Maybe if he waited, the tom would show up. How long would he have to wait? *I will wait as long as it takes.*

Rainwater dripped off his whiskers as he looked to the ground. His entire pelt was wet with the water of the clouds, and he could barely even look up, for if he did, water would drip from the leaves into his gaze. Shifting uncomfortably, he looked back to the ground, allowing his gaze to dart upward as though he expected his mate to come back.

The sun watched Adderheart carefully. When he had left, it had been resting comfortably on the horizon, spreading its pale light around the world. Leaf-bare dulled it slightly, and it could only get a little bit of sun through the dark and unhappy clouds that plagued the skies.

Whereas the sun wanted to try and create a good environment for him, the clouds were not interested in that. They dumped rain and more rain, and somehow, more rain onto the tom, creating a cold and obviously wet environment for him to sit in. He shivered, cold, as a chilly wind twirled around him.

His ears were already pinned to his skull but the dim and dull environment didn't really seem to help, as his gaze just directed

itself down. As time skimped by him, he found that his mood continued to drop lower and lower.

Why would Pantherleap come? His mind offered a snappy question to him with venom tinting its tone and his skull dropped to the ground. It almost sounded like Cougarstar's tone, and his snappy and harsh words from the nightmare echoed within his skull, bouncing around. The tom's memory was tainted by spikes, so whenever he entered Adderheart's head, all he did was poke and prod at it.

This only made things worse, now bleeding from inside his skull. This only could worsen things, providing opportunities for dumb and bad thoughts to escalate and take control of his now weakened head.

He's dead, his brain growled, *why would he come to see you? He can't, even if he wanted to. He's dead. Don't you get it? He's dead and you're the idiot who is waiting around for a* dead cat *to talk to you.* His lips creased and he, upset, looked at the ground. It was reasonable, right? Pantherleap could try his best, right?

Deep down he knew it to be fake. It couldn't be that the tom suddenly gained the ability to see him if he was dead. That was simply not how it worked, and besides, it had never happened in the past. His parents had never gone to see him — but then again, they had probably seen his true feelings all along and immediately wanted to get away from him.

The sun continued to sink down and down into the sky, and slowly, the colors changed; from pale blues and light slates did they slowly morph to a brighter, more valiant color. From these vibrant shades, a few clear ones formed, like the pale and peachy pink that quickly raced its way across the sky, streamers of purple and light plum following.

With no real say in what was happening, the clouds had nothing more to do than to be stained by the warm and pleasant colors that swiftly surrounded them. They clearly weren't happy with it, as the rain that they had been dumping only grew heavier as moments ticked by. Moments that seemed so quickly to race by. And

continued to race by. And time that he could never get back.

Time that he was just sitting around, waiting for his mate, when there was no real way to tell if he was around or not. For all Adderheart knew, Cougarstar had been right the entire time and his mate had gone straight to—

A sharp pang of pain infected his heart and he looked up, ears pinning. That had to be fake, alongside every stupid thing his mind was stringing up for him to try to believe. He looked back to his paws, yet the pang happened again, and he anxiously peered back up. Nothing was there. Tentatively did he look down, and the pang happened once more, sharper and harder than last time.

Breath stolen from his lungs, Adderheart looked back up, and there he was.

At first, it was the slight twirl of light in front of him. The tom had originally thought it to be a trick of the lighting above, but the twirl reappeared and the tone of it shifted to be more... tawny. He immediately got up, balancing awkwardly upon the tree beside him and he peered in front of him.

Though, the next moment it was gone, and he sat back down. The pang within his heart returned and he looked back up to find that the swirl had now turned bigger, something... that meant more. And it didn't disappear. It only grew as it hovered toward him.

The area around him seemed to fade; no longer was it a dark and dingy forest. It was now a bright and colorful world, with a sky full of vibrant and full-fledged colors. Nothing was afraid to be itself. Nothing was pastel or pale or light, everything was fully itself — all the trees were bright and the leaves sang a song of acceptance to the vivid grass below.

Anticipation followed by a furious storm of anxiety pounced upon him. What if it, too, was fake?

But it wasn't, because Pantherleap's starry figure continued to grow more and more prominent. The swirls transformed into full shapes, continuing until it finally molded into the tom's full figure. His pelt

was not as pristine as he would've thought. And there were still a few scars littering his pelt. But it was *him*, it was his mate. He was *here*.

Pantherleap's scent wreathed around him and Adderheart thought he could've cried. He was here...! Somehow, somehow he was here. Pressing against where the tom would've been, he leaned right back into his mate's figure, and a purr sprung up within his throat.

"Adderheart?" His voice drifted through the wind and Adderheart wrapped tightly around him, finding that creating some sort of reply was difficult. His voice was weak compared to Pantherleap's confident tone, and his mate's figure was larger and stronger than his small and injured one.

"Pantherleap— please don't g-go. I can't, I can't lose you—" he hiccuped out the words, quietly twining his tail with his starry mate's.

"I'm never gone, Adderheart," Pantherleap whispered softly, placing a paw upon his mate's injured one. "I will always be with you. I love you."

Adderheart's eyes flickered down to his paw, yet Pantherleap flicked his tail underneath his chin and lifted his skull so their gazes could meet. He looked to his hazy mate, noticing that his tail and ears seemed to be fading away slowly.

"Don't, don't go, please—"

"I'm never gone," he reminded him softly, pressing harder down on his paw. "I'm always with you."

"Okay... I miss you, I love you— I'm sorry I couldn't help..." Adderheart trailed off, meeting his mate's gaze.

Pantherleap smiled and a new spark of love filled Adderheart. "I love you too."

A moment passed and the tom was still there. Adderheart's eyes trailed to his paws, and he found that he no longer had the device that Nova had made on his paw. Confusion sparked and he peered

to Pantherleap's paw. It had the device wrapped around it, and it was starry and faded.

Then his paw disappeared, and Adderheart's eyes flicked upward as though to ask what had happened; his mate was gone, and the world around him transformed back to its dreary and dark state.

But as Adderheart's dark gray eyes flickered back to his paw, it was completely and totally healed.

I will always be with you. I love you. Pantherleap's words rung softly within his skull.

"I love you too," Adderheart whispered.

epilogue

Light.

It was as if the stars themselves had infused into him. He was the light, he was the very star within the blanket of the sky that everyone looked up to. He was made of stardust and tears, combined in a dark sky. He was flying, racing across fields. He didn't need to wait or limp any longer.

Dark.

It was as though the shadows had infected him. He was the darkness, he was the sky that surrounded the bright and shiny stars. He was made of gloom and smiles, mixed up in a concealed room. He was sneaking, figure slim and moving fluidly. He didn't need to stop and wait any longer.

In between.

Nothing was truly one or the other. He stopped to get tugged to one side and then immediately whipped to the other. He was made of stardust and smiles, an in-between that only a few could reach. He could fly and sneak at the same time. He could run and move like water itself.

Voices were hard to hear.

Everything was underwater and yet he was uncontent. He did not want to be below water. Everything was messy and everything was horrible and yet, he couldn't bring himself to want it in the slightest. He wanted everything crisp and nice. And good. And final and good so he could be happy.

If things ended, then how could he make sure that they were okay?

He could feel it. The familiar pain of old age, accompanied by a

gray muzzle and other lighter features. His eyes had dulled over the moons as though tired of watching everything happened. The world continued to turn and he just felt left behind.

Everything continued to slip by him.

Cats died and he could no longer see them. But it didn't matter, not anymore it didn't. Their bodies were long forgotten, and yet, only by him. Cats would be upset and he would have no idea why. The only thing that his mind was stuck on was—

Lyra had died, too. But did she matter if everything was fading for him?

Everything was in a haze, concealed as though he was never meant to know it in the first place. Everything that happened after that one day was hazy, and everything before that one day, save for a few incidents, too was hazy. But he wanted to know. And yet, he couldn't.

Then who would learn the secrets of the world?

That was not for him to know, and he was upset about that.

He craved knowledge, awareness, intelligence. He wanted to know what was going on. Because if something was wrong, then he wanted to fix it. But when everything was speeding past him and memories became blurrier and blurrier, he felt like he was the one who was suffering from the secrets.

It wasn't like he had the secrets. He had access to them, but could not reach them.

Salem became a full member, and so did Wasari — the two toms flashed into his head like a bolt of lightning, like something suddenly unforgotten. The two grew up to be strong and powerful members of the rogue group, and new kits were even born, too.

And yet, they regarded him like a stone.

Almost everyone did. Almost. Tawn's memory popped up in his skull, surrounded by light and warm colors, and Nova was swift to

follow. A tall and slim she-cat, whose name he could not recall, walked toward him within his skull, fluidly moving like the water itself.

All the new kits thought he was scary.

"He never talks! And he's so old," they'd exclaim where they think that he couldn't hear him. *"He's gotta be super deaf or something. He forgets everything all the time and never bothers to even say hello to his friends! I mean, he doesn't have any. He just sits there!"*

He didn't want to be scary.

But it wasn't his fault, was it? He tossed blame like it was a mossball, not wanting it to land on him for too long in case it was deemed his. And yet, somehow, it felt like it always fell back down onto him.

Everything around him pressed in closer. The voices from before flashed back, bright and notable within the watery world he was trapped in. The tom tried to breathe and yet, he couldn't.

"...come on..."

That voice felt closer than the rest.

It was soft, ever pleasant and nice as though it was coaxing him to do something. But whatever it was, he couldn't do it. He couldn't hear, he couldn't speak. His eyes were open but he could barely even see the world; it was simplified into shapes and colors.

He could see a few moving shapes around him and could only assume them to be cats.

But who were they? He would never be able to answer that. He tried to move his head down onto his paws and struggled to do so, a raggedy exhale coming from his figure as he waited for something else to happen. Maybe someone would help him. He didn't know why everything hurt so much.

He didn't want things to hurt as much as they did, but he had no way of stopping it.

The tom craved control and he felt powerless. It was as though the world was still shifting under his paws and shaking and crying like it needed help and he could do nothing to stop it. He was weak, shivering and shaking under the weight of the water all around him.

"...don't...need you here..."

It sounded almost familiar. He tried to move his head to spot whoever was speaking but only found blobs of color that were growing less and less coherent. Everything seemed to slow down more and more as he laid his head back down.

"...close your... please..."

He didn't know what he was supposed to do, but the world was growing blurrier. He wondered briefly if he should try to do something else and yet, the exhaustion and pain that continued to sweep over him was too strong.

And then he closed his eyes.

Bright light flashed behind his vision and a white-hot pain flickered through him like a lightning bolt. Suddenly, every feeling at once surrounded him, pressing closer and closer and closer. He gasped as though he was awake, but nothing changed. Dark and bright lights suddenly flickered in the distance.

Everything was so harsh. The colors morphed into neons and things far too bright for a world that he had thought he'd turned away from. Everything was bright, dark, in the middle. Everything was everything at once. The walls continued to press in, harshly surrounding him.

He was everything and nothing at once. He was a speck of dust, he was the very sky itself. He was nothing and everything. He was the water of the rivers, he was the heat of the sun. He was small, weak, tiny against the walls that pressed in. He was strong as he burst free.

At once, everything was quiet. There was nothing. He was in an

empty space, lost in darkness surrounded by walls of silence. There was nothing there. He was the only thing in a world where it was dark. There was nothing, there was nobody.

A small snap sounded, and then noises returned and so did light and so did dark and everything was back. His dark eyes flew open, and he felt lighter as he blinked twice. He was watching a blurry and a pale figure in front of him, a spectator to the world below. Everything was hazy, still, but he could figure it out.

He was watching himself.

The figure beside him let out a cry and yet, they immediately rose to their paws as they raced out of the den. It was clear what had happened, he knew, as he peered down to his paws and saw stars within them.

No.

He was gone. How? He hadn't solved everything, he had so much more to do. He had to try to understand why everything was so blurry, he had to try to help cats who were struggling. He had to try to figure out other things.

He needed more time, he couldn't go yet. He still had to try to walk around the territory, he had to find Finchtansy still. Panic swirled up within him and he turned around, and the tom found that he could walk upward.

And so he did.

He sprinted up and up and up until he was in the sky, simply hovering as though his paws were on the ground. His dark eyes flitted around and he could see the world below him, and he tried to inch closer to it, but he was trapped in an invisible box.

I need to get down there!

He couldn't go, not now. It was too early. He had so much more time left back there and he could do so many more things if he just had more *time.* He wanted, no, needed, more time. The tom exhaled in a shaky and panicked breath, trying desperately to get down.

"Adderheart?"

The voice, like a sharp knife through the soft cloth of silence, made him stop and after a brief pause of panicked re-settled silence, he turned around and faced the cat.

There was Pantherleap.

"You're here," he spoke again.

Adderheart rocked slightly on his paws. "I need more time," he whispered. "Please tell me... please say. Say I have more time."

Pantherleap stepped forward and the stars in his pelt seemed to glow brighter. "You don't have more time."

"No—!"

"But you don't need it."

Pantherleap inched even closer and blinked, and Adderheart could see starry tears hidden within his gaze. Behind the tears flashed all sorts of emotions. His loneliness, wishing for a cat to love, his sadness, wishing that his mate could be happy.

And yet, here he was, still wanting to go back to the rogues.

"I want—"

"You don't need it," he said quietly. "You spent your time there. And now it's time for you to join the rest of us."

His tail swished and behind him lay tons and tons of cats, all lined up. The ones in the back were taller, stronger, wiser, yet blurrier and faded. And the ones in the front were smaller, with tiny figures and even tinier paws.

Light swirled around them as though they were being transformed and the tom could only watch as the group stepped forward in unison. Yet, a single cat wove through the crowd, and he spotted the pale brown-furred she-cat immediately.

He didn't know who she was, but it was clear that the shiny-furred she-cat knew who he was. Her figure was slightly blurry and forgotten, and yet, it was evident that someone was holding onto her. Someone was remembering her.

"Doepool." Her voice was slippery sweet, slipping from her maw as though it was honey. "A victim of Cougarstar's errors overtime. He threw me and my kits out after hurting us, and we all died."

"I'm—"

"Don't," she said, reaching forward with her muzzle. "You needn't spend time on things long passed. Don't worry about me or my kits," she murmured, flickering her tail at a litter behind her, who smiled. "Focus on right now."

Her nose touched his forehead and at that moment, he felt calm. Nothing was his issue. Nothing that he had left behind was big enough for him to worry about. He was stardust, floating in space as though he was waiting for something to happen.

It was bright again but in a good way. Like how things had been when he'd first been alone with Pantherleap. Doepool dipped her skull and just like that, she dissipated into the crowd.

Adderheart turned and there was Pantherleap.

The two rushed forward and practically collided into each other, curling their tails tightly together. Burying his head into his fur, Adderheart tried his best to keep himself steady but found that they slowly rocked together as though they never wanted to leave.

And they didn't. For once, Adderheart didn't want to go back. It was okay that he hadn't solved every mystery. It was okay that he didn't know everything. Because he was fine right where he was, with the stars all around him and the light so soft yet so strong.

Right next to Pantherleap.

note and trivia

Hello everyone and welcome to the end. You did it! You read every single word of this entire book - hopefully, anyways. If you did, I thank you immensely. I published this book on December 26th, 2018. Today, December 14th, 2019, is just 12 days away from a year of posting it, and many more days of writing and planning.

I am incredibly proud of this book and even prouder to say this book is a major improvement from my last one. I thank everyone who read this one, who read the last one, and even more thanks to those who left comments and votes. I appreciate every single one of you for reading this book, even if you didn't vote.

Don't go yet. I do have some trivia for everyone.

———————

— Pantherleap was killed in order to provide Adderheart the realization that the world is not all that bad; if he were to live under Pantherleap's shadow, he would've never grown emotionally anymore

— Tawn, Pantherleap, and Cougarstar are all of the same litter. A long time ago, Tawn was also in SageClan, but she left when she realized she was gay; this is another layer as to why Cougarstar dislikes cats who are LGBTQ+

— Willowdapple's litter was actually fathered by Nesro, and Adderheart was a coverup for this relationship

— After the battle, SageClan continued on as normal; no changes were made, except that Bearstar has claimed the throne and Marigoldcry quickly took up deputy position

— Palewhisker has actually had two rogue mates, sprung from the fact that his mother, Speckle, was a rogue, however, he killed both

of them; their names were Bat and Heather

— Birchpaw was not originally meant to die; his warrior name would have been Birchsight

— Adderheart died of old age

— There was a brief stint where I reconsidered killing Pantherleap in favor of having him have a traumatic injury but decided this would not allow Adderheart to have the right reaction

— Adderheart died at 76 moons and retired at 66; Pantherleap died at 66 moons

— Doepool, the cat in the epilogue, is the exact same cat as the cat in the prologue

— Milkfrost and Vixenfeather had always been together, yet they had kept it concealed enough so that nobody noticed

— Originally, Adderheart wasn't supposed to go to the rogues, and instead stay with SageClan

— I updated this book (almost) every single Friday of the entire year; while I did miss a few days, I was very consistent

— This book was almost always several chapters pre-written

— The cat who was speaking to Adderheart at the end was Nova

———————

That's all.

Thank you for reading *sage | a warrior cats fanfiction*. I hope you enjoyed.

<3